

“The company is taking risks with the lives of 5,000 workers”

As COVID-19 cases surge, Texas GM workers demand closure of factory

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With COVID-19 infections and deaths surging across the United States, workers in auto, meatpacking and other industries are demanding protection from the deadly disease and the release of information about its spread in factories and workplaces.

Last week, thousands of workers at two Detroit-area Fiat Chrysler (FCA) assembly plants downed their tools and halted production after several workers became ill and were forced to leave work. Anger erupted after FCA management and the United Auto Workers union refused to release any information about the potential COVID-19 cases.

Afterwards, workers at the two assembly plants—Jefferson North and Sterling Heights—set up rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, whose demands included: “Workers must be immediately notified of any cases of COVID-19 and what areas were affected. This information cannot be kept secret from workers.”

With infections and deaths spiking this week in the Dallas-Ft. Worth, Texas area, workers at the General Motors Arlington Assembly Plant called for the shutting down of the sprawling plant, which employs nearly 5,000 workers on three shifts. The demands are so widespread that local union officials felt compelled to call on GM to close the plant “until the curve is flattened.”

Tarrant County, where the GM plant is located, has confirmed a total of 12,344 COVID-19 cases and 228 deaths. On Tuesday, county officials reported a single-day high of 605 new cases and three more deaths, including two Arlington residents. The number of hospitalizations has reached all-time highs and the county’s intensive care units—currently at 75 percent of capacity—could reach their limit in less than three weeks, public health experts warn.

Acknowledging that “No one wants to be here,” local union officials nevertheless bowed to GM, saying lamely that “the decisions are made above us, so we must all try to stay safe for our families inside and outside of GM.”

GM rejected the appeal, making it clear there would be no

slowdown in the production of its highly profitable Chevrolet Tahoe, GMC Yukon and Cadillac Escalade large sport-utility vehicles. “There’s no need to interrupt production,” GM spokesman Jim Cain said, claiming that there were “multiple layers of protection in the plant to prevent a spread of the virus.”

A spokesman for the national union leadership in Detroit said it was up to corporate management to decide whether or not to close the plant.

“The virus is spreading throughout Texas and there have been cases at our plant,” Jennifer, a veteran worker at the plant, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Every day we are taking risks with the lives of 5,000 workers and their families. We need to shut this plant down, but GM and the union say a lot of these trucks have already been ordered so we have to keep up production, no matter how many lives are lost. We’re already working six days a week and they want to push it to seven.

“The corporation and the UAW are sharing the same bread together, and we’re the ones who are getting hurt. I’d like to get my remaining years in and retire, if I live that long.”

James, a worker with five years at the plant, added, “We know there are cases, but we’re not getting any information about who, where and when. Management and the union claim there are privacy laws that prevent them from giving us details. This act like this is above Top Secret and God will strike us down if we know anything.

“There are some precautions in the plant, like masks and temperature checks, but nobody knows whether we are really safe. You can be asymptomatic and still spread it. Everybody from the government on down is lying to us.

“Right now, we’re only at half production. What is going to happen when we ramp up to full production after the July 4 weekend? After the holiday, you are going to have more cases of the virus with seven-day production, and we are going to see a spike of cases and other people falling out from lack of oxygen because they are wearing masks in the

heat.

“Should we shut this plant down? Absolutely. All the big corporations care about is how can they squeeze more out of us to pay their shareholders and executives. As for the politicians, they come from big business, go into government and look after big business, and then when they leave office, they go back to big business. All the arguing between Trump and the Democrats is nothing more than a family feud.

“We never hear about it, but it doesn’t surprise me that the Chrysler workers in Detroit and the Mexican workers are striking to protect themselves from the pandemic. We’re not slaves and we’re not going to put up with this.”

These sentiments are shared by autoworkers and other workers across the country and around the world. A Fiat Chrysler worker at the company’s Tipton Transmission plant just outside of Kokomo, Indiana told the WSWS, “Greed means more than human life. Positive cases are blowing up everywhere. Somebody needs to get this information out there because nobody should be going back now. They think they can treat workers like farm animals.”

It is the official policy of many corporations and local officials to conceal information about cases of infection in order to prevent disruptions to the reckless back-to-work campaign spearheaded by President Trump and supported by state and local Democrats and Republicans.

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The giant online retailer and logistics company Amazon is one of those companies, with its top officials claiming that the collection of such information, let alone its release, is “not particularly helpful.” Based on her review of reported cases, former Amazon worker Jana Jumpp estimates that at least 1,600 workers have been infected and 10 have died.

Bloomberg News recently wrote that Amazon “has a sophisticated tracking regime that occurs out of public view,” contradicting the company’s public claims that it does not collect data on infections and deaths. The tracking system, according to Bloomberg, includes where sick employees live, whether they’re apartment-dwellers or live in a freestanding house, what shifts they typically work and what tasks they perform inside the warehouses.

According to an internal memo reviewed by Bloomberg, a recent outbreak of COVID-19 cases at Amazon’s warehouse in Shakopee, Minnesota, near Minneapolis, exceeded by at least four times the infection rate of surrounding communities. This directly contradicted statements on CBS News’ “60 Minutes” program by Dave Clark, Amazon’s senior vice president for worldwide operations, that cases were “popping up at roughly a rate generally just under what the actual community infection rates are.”

As of mid-May, Amazon was aware of 45 cases at its MSP1 facility in Shakopee, enough for an infection rate of 1.7 percent, according to the memo. That was higher than the rate for the rural county that surrounds the warehouse, and roughly four times higher than any county in the nearby Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

According to Bloomberg, the internal memo “acknowledges workers’ appetite for more transparency, saying that two-thirds of safety-related comments on white boards set up inside the facility called for more information about infections.” Amazon addressed the comments with notices posted to the same boards and verbal communications with workers, the authors wrote. At other warehouses, such communications have primarily consisted of reassurances about the adequacy of Amazon’s cleaning protocols.

Concealing the spread of infections is also the modus operandi of the meatpacking industry and many state and local governments in areas where the giant corporations dominate. More than 36,000 meat processing and farm workers have tested positive and at least 116 have died, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network, which acknowledges that the real figure is likely higher.

Citing the outbreak of cases at a Case Farms poultry processing plant in North Carolina, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that on June 8, Burke County health officials reported 136 new COVID-19 cases, a 25 percent increase in its total caseload, “yet neither the company, county officials nor the North Carolina department of health and human services would confirm whether those cases were connected to Case Farms.”

As of last week, there were 2,772 confirmed cases of infections in 28 meat processing plant “clusters” around the state, the North Carolina Department of Health acknowledged, without specifying further. As for Burke County, local spokeswoman Lisa Moore told the newspaper, “We know where [the cases] are, but we are not a county that can divulge every place where they are.”

In Iowa, Dickson Industries, a company that has long made garments for meatpacking workers, has donated 500 body bags to the state government as the state prepares for a spike that will likely overwhelm local hospitals. The Iowa Department of Public Health has not released data on the number of meatpacking workers who have died from COVID-19.



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