

# UAW and General Motors downplay outbreaks of COVID-19 at US auto plants

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Auto corporations in the US and the United Auto Workers (UAW) have continued their policy of coverup as COVID-19 cases spread throughout the plants. Two clusters have been reported at General Motors plants since states recklessly began a premature reopening of their economies, according to the *Detroit Free Press* Friday.

Since production restarted in May, 22 new cases have been reported at GM's Arlington Assembly Plant in Texas, where over 4,000 workers build GM's highly profitable SUVs. Twelve new cases have also been reported at the company's assembly plant in Wentzville, Missouri where over 4,200 workers build full-size pickup trucks and vans.

The auto industry in North America was shut down in March, even before many state stay-at-home orders went into effect, after workers at auto plants in Ontario, Canada, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio organized independent wildcat actions to protest unsafe working conditions, defying both the company's demands and attempts by the Unifor union and the UAW to keep them on the job.

The US-based auto corporations collaborated with UAW to shuffle workers back into the plants in mid-May under the pretense that they were being thoroughly cleaned daily and that adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and personal hygiene measures would be provided and that the plants would be configured to comply with social distancing.

Returning under conditions of financial duress due to difficulties obtaining unemployment pay, workers went back to the plants to find that virtually none of the highly touted safety measures had been put into effect.

While demanding workers go back to work in a nonessential industry to produce profits for corporate shareholders, General Motors is seeking to shift complete responsibility for health and safety onto the workers.

In a statement to the *Free Press*, GM spokesperson David Barnas said, "Many of the same steps we follow inside our plants can help keep people safe when they're not working, and that includes staying home if you're not well, social distancing when you leave home, frequent hand-washing and the use of masks."

The UAW has issued a toothless statement in regards to the climbing case count at the two plants. Union spokesperson Brian Rothenberg said, "The UAW is watching very carefully how these health and safety factors are impacting different plants, and we are in a continual dialogue at all levels. ... Health and safety for all members is our priority."

Autoworkers know the UAW's word is just as worthless as that of corporate management, with whom they are in "continual dialogue" on the best way to suppress the mounting opposition of workers to the flouting of safety protocols.

The UAW has no intention to force GM or any of the auto corporations to shut down plants. The union made no effort to mobilize workers to shut down production in spite of its posturing last month, when five positive COVID-19 cases had been reported among workers at Wentzville.

The *Free Press* reported that an anonymous source close to the UAW stated that GM would clean the Wentzville plant with a chemical spray over the Fourth of July holiday weekend.

While the UAW and corporations are working behind the scenes to play down the health crisis, workers' anger is reaching a breaking point as they demand that the plants be shut down again for their safety.

"They should shut down. It's spreading," a veteran worker at GM Wentzville told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. She said workers suspect there are many more than the 12 reported COVID cases at the plant that management is not telling them about. She also questioned whether the factory was really going to be sprayed with disinfectant over the weekend, since some workers were being asked to come in to work.

"There is no social distancing when we are clocking out," she said. "The [UAW] chairman is always at the door standing there seeing it and hasn't done anything. It's like herding cattle. He's standing there and members of management are too. None of them says anything."

In opposition to the UAW—a bought-and-paid-for

organization that works in the interests of the corporations against the working class—US autoworkers have taken an important step toward by forming independent rank-and-file safety committees at the Fiat Chrysler (FCA) Jefferson North (JNAP) and Sterling Heights (SHAP) assembly plants in Michigan.

“We must not be kept in the dark about a virus that could potentially kill us. After a hard day of work, we have the right to come home in one piece, not sick, not hurting,” stated the workers of the JNAP committee.

To build support for their struggle and expand their movement, members of the JNAP and SHAP committees have appealed to autoworkers across the US and the world to form their own independent rank-and-file committees at their plants. The appeal has garnered growing support.

A worker at an FCA plant in Indiana criticized the filthy conditions in the plant, caused by the company’s relentless drive for profit. “They don’t care about people at all, just parts and numbers. It isn’t safe at all, and it’s filthy in the plant. The bathrooms are disgusting. It looks like the floors never get mopped. When we first came back, it was clean, but it slowly reverted back to the way it was. They probably don’t pay the cleaning crew enough money, and they don’t care.

“They do have stickers on the floor for show, but there is no social distancing at all. There’s basically two crews in the building at once, and people are running into each other. The time frames should be staggered to keep people out of the way. I make sure the stations on my team are cleaned at the start of the shift, but after that, I don’t know. The line just keeps moving. If the line stops, here comes management wondering why!”

The same worker called for building rank-and-file safety committees in every plant to combat the union and management: “Just like with any struggle, if there’s enough people to overthrow the culprit, or whatever is the cause, the people will win. The people will outnumber the culprit, and they have no choice but to give in! Change comes about in numbers, that’s the only way. It’s just like with civil rights, if enough people revolt, change has to come. Once it gets started, it will be hard to stop. That’s the issue, it’s just getting organized to be able to have the special committees. I believe in it.”

The WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party call on autoworkers to build rank-and file committees and join hands with the JNAP and SHAP workers in a struggle against the corporations and unions for workers’ control over health and safety measures, line speed, pay and benefits in the plants.

These committees must be organized democratically to give voice to and fight for what workers need, not what the

companies and union says can be afforded. These demands include:

1. Workers must be immediately notified of any cases of COVID-19 and what areas were affected. This information cannot be kept secret from workers.
2. When a case is confirmed, the factory should be closed for 24 hours for deep cleaning, not just the affected area, but the whole plant. Preventative maintenance is needed to ensure a safe and comfortable working environment.
3. Social distancing must be implemented when entering and leaving the plant and during bathroom, lunch and other break times.
4. The line must be stopped for 10 minutes every hour to enable workers to take off their masks, rest and cool off.
5. Workers must have regular, universal testing. Temperature checks and self-reporting symptoms are not enough.
6. If conditions are not safe, workers have the right to refuse to work without threat of retaliation by management and the union.

The fight for the basic right to a safe workplace is one that must encompass the entire working class, in every industry and in every country, connected by the means of production in which every worker plays a role. The rank-and-file committees are the first step toward breaking out of the isolation imposed by the corporate political parties and unions worldwide and building new connections among workers to carry their struggle forward.



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