

“I hate going into that hell hole”

Ford workers in Louisville denounce unsafe conditions as opposition grows to COVID-19 spread in auto plants

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Join the fight to defend workers' health and safety! For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your factory, send an email to the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org to learn more.

Workers at the Ford Louisville Assembly Plant (LAP) are fuming over the efforts by management and the United Auto Workers (UAW) to conceal information about the spread of COVID-19 infections in the factory.

In the auto plants, the pandemic is raging out of control. There are reports of at least 31 cases at the Fiat Chrysler Toledo Assembly Complex; 23 at the General Motors Wentzville, Missouri factory. General Motors announced that it will eliminate the third shift at the Wentzville plant on July 20 due to mass absenteeism over fears of the spread of the deadly disease. The move could impact as many as 1,250 workers.

As of July 3, there were 22 confirmed cases at the General Motors Arlington, Texas plant near Dallas. On Friday, county officials reported 1,164 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the total case count in Dallas County to 31,525, with 445 total deaths to date. GM has rejected any halting of production at its most profitable plant in the country, which produces Cadillac Escalade, GMC Yukon, Chevrolet Tahoe and Suburban full-size SUVs.

In response to the spread of COVID-19 and the abandonment by the UAW and management of even minimal safety measures in the drive for more production workers at three Fiat Chrysler plants have set up rank-and-file safety committees.

Committees have been established at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, just north of the city, and the Toledo North Assembly Complex that builds Jeep brand vehicles. Workers have launched the committees to oppose the union-management gang up against workers and to fight for basic safety measures to protect lives.

Support for such a committee is growing at the 65-year-old plant in Louisville, which employs more than 4,500 workers who labor along 20 miles of assembly lines building Ford

Escapes and Lincoln Corsairs.

“They are working us full throttle. It’s HORRIBLE!” declared an LAP worker who wrote in to the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*. “I hate going into that hell hole. I’m fed up with that stupid survey,” he said, regarding the daily questionnaire asking whether workers are sick or have come in contact with anyone who has been infected. The company and the union don’t even follow the safety procedures, which they put in place to justify forcing workers back into the factory in the midst of the pandemic, the worker said.

“We had a guy that didn’t pass the survey but didn’t have symptoms,” she continued, “so he was able to work. Ford Motor is not going to shut production down.”

In a report last Saturday, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* wrote that Kentucky saw another large increase, with 453 new COVID-19 cases on that day alone after an increase of 426 cases the day before. The surge prompted Governor Andy Beshear to declare that the state is “no longer in a plateau; but cases are increasing.”

The governor’s press release said that Kentucky has had more than 19,100 cases and at least 622 fatalities, including the deaths of a 69-year-old woman and an 86-year-old man from Jefferson County, where Louisville is located.

“We are being lied to,” the LAP worker continued. “They are not, and will not, shut down. They are not following protocol. NOT! The cleaners will walk down the aisle and spray a solution. There’s no wiping. I haven’t seen one in the bathrooms in five weeks.”

As in other auto plants, corporate management and the United Auto Workers (UAW) are deliberately concealing information about the spread of the virus from workers. However, workers have exposed the horrific conditions in the plant through Facebook pages and through the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*.

A UAW committeeman posted on Friday, “We have another confirmed case of COVID-19. This was a fork driver in Final

on day shift. According to the employee he stays on his fork except to eat lunch in his car. The fork has been quarantined and cleaned, and the restroom and turnstile used by the employee are being sanitized.”

His post was followed by a series of questions, such as “Did it get quarantined before B crew driver used it?” and “Which line did he drive?” and a series of sarcastic thank-yous and “I truly appreciate you keeping us informed.”

The worker who reached out to the *Autoworker Newsletter* commented, “One person can’t change the situation. It takes an army to stick together. We need the rank and file committees you are talking about.”

Another worker on the thread highlighted the inadequacy of the Ford/UAW safety protocol. “Not trying to freak anyone out here ...” he said. “But if someone tests positive for COVID-19 and their area and nearby stations are cleaned (that’s great). Wouldn’t every single car they touched still be passed down the line and multiple other lines without being cleaned?”

The workers reported four confirmed cases in just a few days: an assembler on line one, one on line six, another in pre-delivery and the fork driver just mentioned in Final on day shift.

Another post begins, “Normally I keep my head down and do my job, but one of the positive cases of COVID was the employee right up the line from me. I’ve had conversations with this man, he was in every car I worked on right after he got out. Failed the survey this morning obviously, called medical: I was then informed that I was ... not in close enough proximity to him that Ford would get me tested. I was referred but I’ll have to use my own insurance and possibly a co-pay, because f..._ employees, right Ford?”

A co-worker replied: “What do they mean not in close enough proximity? You’re the very next job down from him. And by definition, being in close proximity to someone not only includes space but also time. As soon as he finishes up his subwoofer, you’re installing the quarter panels right on top of it.”

Many workers were angered by the contrast between their desperate struggle to protect themselves and their families from the deadly virus just to bring home a pay check and the fabulous sums being heaped up on Wall Street.

Another comment highlighted the mood: “Guy projectile vomiting the line next to mine, COVID cases popping up in different area of the plant and all Ford has to say is your health is your problem. -- i.e., they are not following the so-called procedures they put in place nor are they actually effective. This place is a joke. The only reason we are here is so Dow stocks won’t keep falling as we compose a large volume of it.”

As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its statement of March 23 as the CARES Act, the multi trillion Wall Street bailout, was going through Congress:

“Share buybacks were one of the principal means employed by corporate executives to enrich themselves. As the *Harvard*

Business Review explained:

“The 465 companies in the S&P 500 Index in January 2019 that were publicly listed between 2009 and 2018 spent, over that decade, \$4.3 trillion on buybacks, equal to 52% of net income, and another \$3.3 trillion on dividends, an additional 39% of net income. In 2018 alone, even with after-tax profits at record levels because of the Republican tax cuts, buybacks by S&P 500 companies reached an astounding 68% of net income, with dividends absorbing another 41%.”

The statement concludes, “The ugly reality of capitalist financial practices and the grotesque plundering of corporate assets refute the lying phrase that is intoned whenever reference is made to the needs of the working class: “There is no money!”

“The problem is not an absence of money, but the control of society’s productive forces by the capitalist class.”

A report on the situation at LAP from the UAW illustrated the union’s collusion with management. “The Company has notified the Union that we have a confirmed case of Covid-19,” UAW Local 862 blandly observed. “The company is following the playbook that UAW/Ford have agreed to and follows CDC guidelines. The employee who tested positive was in Predelivery on day shift. All employees that were in the effected(sic.) area were notified and have been directed to take action and get tested immediately. The area was cleaned and sanitized.”

By contrast, the workers are demanding the plant be shut down. One wrote, “There should be someone in our Union to demand that we shut down for the rest of the week and next week for cleaning & for those that chose to go out of town on shut down ... can go get tested, giving ample enough time for them to get results. Apparently we need more reliable people screening us in at the gates. Someone, need to take this into consideration. This Covid-19 is not to be taken lightly especially when we have no other options but to come to work because CARES Act only cover certain situations!!!”

The halting of production due to unsafe conditions will not be carried out by the UAW, which is tied by a million threads to the corporations and has massive investments on the stock markets too. It is up to workers. That is why rank-and-file safety committees are needed.



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