

“We’re not going to compromise because this is our safety”

Meatpacking, auto and health care workers take action to protect lives as pandemic surges in US

Jessica Goldstein, Jerry White
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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 WSWWS Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org to learn more.

With the United States setting daily records for new cases of COVID-19, hospitals, meatpacking plants, auto factories and other large workplaces have become a battlefield between workers demanding safe conditions and corporations demanding maximum production and profits.

On Friday, hundreds of meatpacking workers conducted a wildcat strike at the JBS beef processing plant in Greeley, Colorado, the deadliest workplace in the state, with at least eight COVID-19 deaths and 287 workers who have tested positive.

Workers said the strike, which was held in defiance of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, was initiated by “black hats” on the fabricating floor, angered over the lack of hazard pay. However, workers who perform other duties in the plant and wear different colored hats quickly joined the job action.

“Now isn’t like before,” one worker, not a black hat, told the *Greeley Tribune*. “Before, there were many Latinos who were fearful and there was a lot of separation between the people. Today, what we showed is it doesn’t matter where you’re from, if you’re Hispanic, Puerto Rican, Mexican, El Salvadoran, we’re all united today. And we all left together.”

Despite threats by management personnel who began confiscating employee badges, workers refused to continue to work and stood with their hands clasped in front of their waists in unity. “Someone told me return to my line, and I said no,” the worker said. “I put my hands like this, and I stayed. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Workers at the Greeley plant, which employs 3,000 workers, are paid less than workers in other beef processing plants in Colorado and have been forced to work in unsafe conditions, wearing the same masks for long periods of time and being forced to work sick or next to a co-worker with symptoms. Brazilian multinational JBS has also been hit by strikes in Brazil, which trails only the United States for the most COVID-19 deaths in the world.

After a series of earlier walkouts and job actions, including at the

Greeley plant, President Trump used the Defense Production Act in late April to order meat processing plants to stay open. Since then, the number of deaths and infections in the industry has more than doubled, with more than 30,000 meatpacking workers testing positive nationally and at least 100 deaths, according to data compiled by the Food and Environment Reporting Network.

Strikes and protests are also continuing in the health care industry. Nearly 800 frontline health care workers have died and at least 100,000 have been infected, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Over the weekend, 720 striking nurses in Joliet, Illinois rejected a contract proposal from AMITA Health because it did not address their demands for increased staffing to address dangerously high patient-to-nurse ratios.

Opposition is growing in the auto assembly and parts plants as well. The auto industry reopened in mid-May after a two-month shutdown, which workers forced through a series of wildcat strikes in March.

The automakers are ramping up production, regardless of the risk to workers’ lives, to pay off increased debts incurred over the last decade even as they funneled profits to their largest shareholders. Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who defied lockdown orders to reopen his Fremont, California plant in May, is due to collect the second portion of his pay award from the company’s 200 percent rise in share value this year, adding another \$2.4 billion to his \$70.5 billion fortune.

Global automotive supplier DENSO confirmed Friday that one worker at its thermal manufacturing facility in Battle Creek, Michigan died after contracting COVID-19 and 18 others have tested positive at its Michigan plants, including seven during the last two weeks alone.

General Motors has rejected demands for the temporary closure of its assembly plant in Arlington, Texas, where 23 cases were reported over 10 days ago. No updates have been provided by the company, which refuses to release details about infections at any of its plants. The Arlington plant, the company’s most profitable, is located in the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex, one of the major COVID-19 hotspots in the US, with nearly 23,000 confirmed cases.

GM announced Saturday that it would end the third shift at its Wentzville Assembly Plant near St. Louis, Missouri on July 20 due to high absenteeism among workers concerned about contracting the disease. Over the weekend, officials in St. Charles County, where the plant is located, reported 494 new cases of the coronavirus, a 266 percent increase over the previous 14 days.

Wentzville workers estimate that there are at least 24 cases at the plant, a five-fold increase over the past month. A veteran worker at the factory told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “The people who go to medical [GM’s internal medical department] and get tested, those are the ones they’re counting. They’re not counting the ones tested outside the plant. We figure there are 30 or more cases.”

She added, “I’ve been doing 12 hours because almost nobody is there on third shift. They had to shut down the stamping plant the other day and bring those people over to general assembly to help.”

The exhausting schedule for first- and second-shift workers would only get worse when the third shift, which has 1,250 workers, was cut, she said. The safest thing would be to close the plant for several weeks. “Our jobs are so close together. Cases have been going up fast in St. Charles County. It’s crazy.”

Workers are increasingly taking up the call by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW.

Workers at Fiat Chrysler’s Jeep assembly complex in Toledo, Ohio, where at least 31 workers have tested positive, have been the latest to form a rank-and-file safety committee. They have issued a list of demands, which include the immediate release of information about infections, the shutting down of any affected plant for at least 24 hours for deep cleaning, and the right of workers to halt production due to unsafe conditions.

Fiat Chrysler workers at the Jefferson North (JNAP) plant in Detroit and the Sterling Heights (SHAP) plant just north of the city have also formed rank-and-file safety committees. In late June, workers in both plants carried out work stoppages following the refusal of management and the UAW to release information about infections or provide safe working conditions.

Describing conditions in the Toledo plant, one Jeep worker told the *WSWS*, “We’ve had 30 cases in the past couple of weeks. Water stations were disinfected in May and never disinfected again.” Workers, he said, had organized a Facebook page to let people know voluntarily who is testing positive because the company and UAW are not giving any information.

“The company makes up reasons to say that workers who are in contact with others testing positive don’t need to quarantine. The union is not doing anything. Because of absenteeism, managers are working on the line without wearing masks, elbow to elbow with workers.”

“The UAW is a joke!” a young temporary part-time worker (TPT) at the plant added. “I want to help my fellow union brothers and sisters stand up and do what the union isn’t doing for us! Being a TPT I get crapped on by the same union I pay full dues to, even though I’m working 50-60 hours a week. I will do all I can to show love and support to all those fighting for safe working conditions!”

Calling on all workers to form rank-and-file committees, a worker at Ford’s Dearborn Truck Plant near Detroit said: “We want to protect ourselves and our families. We’re not going to negotiate with management, they don’t have our same interests. We’re not going to compromise with anybody because this is our safety. We need to inspire some change that is going to have a lasting effect for future generations. Enough’s enough; we need to say we’re going to run things.”

Operations at US assembly plants are wholly dependent on keeping supplier plants running at full speed in Mexico, which has now surpassed Italy for the fourth highest number of COVID-19 deaths in the world, with 35,000 deaths, according to official counts widely suspected to be gross underestimations.

A worker at GM’s complex in Silao, Mexico told the *WSWS*: “So far, six workers have died from COVID-19 at the plant, including one recently. Neither the local authorities, company or union have shown their faces. We confirmed the cases with notes from doctors and documents from workers themselves. Supposedly, corporations should be working at 30 percent of full production, but at Silao we’re working at 90-100 percent.”

“I think it’s necessary that all workers’ organizations make the call to try to control production,” the worker continued. “I hope there can be a show of solidarity from workers. We’re trying to coordinate workers within different areas who have a list of demands we can fight for.”

Workers at the Nakamura Engineering Works México auto parts plant in Zacatecas walked off the job July 7 to demand the payment of a profit-sharing bonus owed to them since May. The workers, who labor for 12 hours a day and are paid 1,500 pesos (US\$67) a week, are also demanding adequate masks to protect them from COVID-19 and toxic fumes from industrial furnaces. When asked by a *La Jornada* reporter what their union has done for them, one worker replied, “We have a charro [company] union, the union is not with us, it’s with the company.”



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