

COVID-19 outbreak at Battle Creek, Michigan auto parts plant

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One employee has died and thirteen others have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last two weeks at DENSO Manufacturing in Battle Creek, Michigan. The thermal manufacturing facility employs a total of 2,900 employees and is a part of the Toyota Group.

DENSO employees have also tested positive for COVID-19 at the small motors manufacturing facility in Battle Creek, the research and development office in Grand Rapids, Michigan and the North American headquarters in Southfield, Michigan, according to the company. The spread of the virus demonstrates the worthlessness of the supposed safety protocols trumpeted by DENSO Manufacturing Michigan President Kevin Carson, including social distancing, limiting the number of employees on-site, the wearing of face masks, temperature screenings and increased cleanings.

The company, working with the Calhoun and Barry County Health Departments, has claimed that it has determined that all seventeen cases companywide were contracted outside of the workplace. This was according to Bridgette LaRose, manager for corporate communications at DENSO.

At the same time that the corporate and political establishment enforces its homicidal back-to-work policy, they are working together to deflect blame for the inevitable spread of deadly COVID-19 infections from the companies onto the shoulders of individual employees.

Jessica, a 42-year-old worker at DENSO with two years at the plant, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* and described the sweatshop conditions under which workers are forced to bear the entire burden of implementing safety measures. “If it’s 85 degrees outside, then it’s well over 100 degrees in the building. Your clothes are sticking to you, and the

humidity is unbearable.”

Jessica is facing possible termination because anxiety-induced panic attacks have prevented her from working on the line while wearing a mask. She was forced back to work in June, having been denied unemployment benefits in the preceding period due to problems in the records of the Social Security Administration. “I stepped one foot in there. They gave us a couple masks and some hand sanitizer. I tried the mask and, due to previous issues, immediately had an anxiety attack. I tried the face shield and went into an anxiety attack—sweating, crying, shaking. Medical came and told me I need to see a doctor. I was escorted out of the building and haven’t been back.”

Jessica’s mother, age 64, and son, age 24, also work at the plant. Her son has developed sores on his face from the combination of skin contact with the masks and high heat and humidity.

She said, “It’s extremely hot. They are not allowing any extra five-to-ten-minute breaks. People have been falling out like crazy. Last year they gave us five-minute breaks, increasing to ten minutes or fifteen if it was extremely hot. They haven’t done that at all this year.”

“They now allow you to bring a personal water bottle to the line. We were never allowed that before. But my son and my mom say the water doesn’t stay cold. They used to have it where you could get a cup and have cold Gatorade or water. Now you have to bring your own, and the water gets really hot after a couple of hours in the factory.”

The workers are tasked with maintaining as much social distancing as they can while still satisfying the demands of DENSO. Jessica stated: “There’s no way they can do six feet of separation on the line. You have about a person and a half distance. They have shields

between them. Before breaks they shut down a couple of seconds early so everyone can wipe down their own stuff. They shut down the cafeteria except for the vending machines. But if their customers [Toyota assembly plants] are operating, then there's not much the company can do."

Another DENSO worker who wished to remain anonymous explained to the WSWs how difficult it is for workers to obtain the necessary cleaning supplies to be safe. "They post that cleaning supplies are at security, which is way away from our break rooms and such."

This worker explained the absurdity of the pretense of social distancing on the factory line, where workers are forced to share tools. "We are constantly 'farmed out' [i.e. sent to another area] so we're in constant physical contact with each other... When we rotate or ask to be relieved to go to the restroom, we are all touching the drivers and brushes, and most stations are not six feet apart."

Even during break periods, social distancing cannot be followed. "We have about 40 plus people going to breaks and lunches at any given time... We all use the same bathrooms and sinks and everything else, like microwave and vending machines. [Facilities] are not regularly cleaned like [DENSO] states that they are."

She also emphasized that despite the grueling conditions, workers are told that they must individually work to prevent the spread of the virus. "We pour sweat all day with just a single fan at our station if you're lucky enough to be on a station rather than parts picking. We work ten hours a day normally."

The outbreak comes as autoworkers at the Fiat Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, FCA Jefferson North Assembly Plant, and FCA Toledo North Assembly Plant have formed rank-and-file safety committees to take the struggle for worker safety out of the hands of management and the criminal UAW and into the hands of workers themselves.

After Jessica heard the demands of the Jefferson North Assembly Plant Rank and File Safety Committee, she said, "I think that's all awesome! I like the idea of slowing down and taking the masks off for a minute."

We urge any workers from DENSO or other autoworkers to contact the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*. The WSWs pledges to assist workers in

forming rank-and-file safety committees to fight for the safety of workers and their families.



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