

US automakers continue cover-up of COVID-19 outbreaks as workers call for action

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Join the new Facebook group, the Ford/GM/Chrysler Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network. 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.

Fiat Chrysler, the corporate media and the United Auto Workers are continuing their cover-up the surge of COVID-19 cases at the Toledo North Assembly Complex in northwest Ohio and other auto factories across the US. So far, 40 cases have been reported at the Toledo facility, which builds several lines of Jeep brand vehicles, but the real number is likely much larger.

On Wednesday, the newly formed Toledo Jeep Rank-and-File Safety Committee issued a statement denouncing the cover-up of the spread of COVID-19 in the plant and called for full reporting and disclosure. In the face of the dire situation confronting the nearly 7,000 workers at the giant facility, the committee demanded, “The Toledo Assembly Complex MUST be shut down and all employees that wish to be tested, must be tested for free. Nobody is to return to work until all test results have come in. Just testing ‘potential’ cases is unsafe and still poses a threat to the safety of others.”

Anger is mounting over the concealing of information, management’s flouting of elementary health and sanitation precautions and the targeting of workers who raise concerns. Workers writing in to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* describe flagrant violations of minimal standards.

“I want to remain anonymous as speaking out publicly is grounds for termination!” wrote one Jeep worker. “There is no cleaning being done. We are constantly on top of each other thru out the day! There is no way we can stay 6 feet apart. Trash bins are full from previous shift everyday. Floors are dirty, hand rails are dirty, and the only place they keep clean is the bathroom. FCA makes us clean Hazmat when we are not properly trained nor have proper PPE to clean Hazmat nor are there any Hazmat disposal bins anywhere in sight.”

Another Toledo worker added, “Workers on the line are told not to disclose information about new cases. After a case was discovered, they didn’t shut down, they didn’t deep clean, they just stopped the line to find a replacement and then ran production.

“I’m fairly certain that coming in contact with someone infected results in a two-week self isolation quarantine which is paid. So, I

surmise they’re doing everything they can, they as in corporate and our union steward, to make sure we all don’t self-quarantine because they would not be able to run. They do not care about our health, safety, nor do they care about the safety of our families. The only thing I’ve noticed is that they’ve done everything they can to make this place run 10-hour shifts, six days a week while not being held legally liable if anyone gets sick or dies from COVID here. Most despicable thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

Since the pandemic, there has been mass absenteeism at the Toledo Jeep plant as workers stay home out of fear of contracting the virus at work. FCA, with the assistance of the UAW, has been making up the manpower shortage through the intensified exploitation of temporary workers, who must come in when called or face immediate termination.

In the face of mounting worker anger over the violation of health and safety, the *Detroit News* published an article Thursday entitled “Workers seek answers about their rights as pandemic rages on.” Evidently aimed at damage control, it related statements from concerned workers and quoted self-serving comments by Fiat Chrysler and UAW officials.

The article began by noting rising disquiet among workers at different workplaces over the forced return to work and the lack of basic safety measures and accountability by employers. It notes that the supposed federal safety watchdog, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has no COVID-19 guidelines and is basically allowing companies to self-regulate. Despite OSHA and its state affiliates receiving more than 20,000 COVID-19-related complaints from workers, they have reportedly issued only one citation.

The *Detroit News* quotes FCA management, which makes the absurd claim that “Since restarting our operations, we have not had any spread of the virus in our plants.” It also quotes UAW Local 12 President Bruce Baumhower at the Toledo North plant, who noted passively regarding conditions at the plant, “It’s the hand we were dealt.” In fact, the UAW has acted as an attorney and enforcer for management in herding workers back into the auto plants under blatantly unsafe conditions.

In a comment to a local news outlet earlier in the week, Baumhower said that workers could “strike over safety.” He added, “It may come to that if the company doesn’t turn things around.”

This is empty bluster aimed at fooling workers. As autoworkers know, the bought-and-paid-for stooges in the UAW leadership are in the pockets of management and have no intention of waging any struggle on behalf of workers. The UAW is also facing a federal takeover due to widespread corruption, giving the union bureaucrats even more incentive to collaborate in the Trump administration's homicidal back-to-work campaign.

Who the UAW and management consider the real enemy was alluded to in the *Detroit News* piece, which quotes UAW spokesman Brian Rothenberg, who declares, "Some of the information being spread by social media is not based in fact." He added, "Rumors persist, and daily we try to clarify for members and the media the facts." He said the union was "committed to continuing to find the best way to communicate factually—including some plants where positive case updates are posted each day in the plant."

He does not name the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, but that is the clear target. The reports by the *Autoworker Newsletter* are widely read in the factories and provide timely information about conditions that are being covered up by the UAW and management. Most importantly, the call by the *Autoworker Newsletter* for workers to build rank-and-file safety committees, independently of the UAW, to enforce safe working conditions, is being taken up by increasing numbers of workers.

The shutdown of the auto industry in mid-March was due to the initiative of rank-and-file workers in opposition to the UAW. FCA workers in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Canada, including Toledo Jeep workers, carried out a wave of unauthorized work stoppages, forcing the closure of the industry. The plants were reopened, with the assistance of the UAW, two months ago and anger is reaching a breaking point over unsafe conditions.

"If someone comes to work who tests positive and we come into contact with them, we should all be isolated," a member of the Toledo Jeep Rank-and-File Safety Committee declared. "We are being extorted to work in unsafe conditions. The union is just there to relay instructions from management and collect union dues."

"If you go get tested, they just leave you off work for a while" said a younger Jeep worker. "I have kids to feed. It is not like people are trying to get out of work. They just want to be safe."

"They are forcing us to work 10-hour days, yet they canceled our sick days in the last contract. We never even got a physical contract. We can't take pick days; we can't take vacations. But the union is fine with it. Workers are the ones catching it, people are throwing up and passing out at work. They are violating the law, but they know they are not going to get in trouble."

Another Jeep worker wrote, "The UAW has given up our ability to even have time out of this place with our family who I'm afraid of infecting with COVID every time I come home. Everyone has been getting a raw deal here for a long time and the UAW is more company than the company."

These conditions are being replicated in plant after plant across North America. Six workers have reportedly died from COVID-19 at the General Motors Silao assembly complex in Mexico, which produces GM's highly profitable pickup trucks along with the Fort Wayne, Indiana and Flint, Michigan plants. More workers have been infected.

On Thursday, workers reported on Facebook that production was temporarily halted at the Dana Corporation in Toledo that supplies axles for Jeep vehicles after a worker tested positive. Workers at another parts supplier, Faurecia, that operates a plant in Toledo building exhaust systems for Detroit automakers, report that the UAW is trying to suppress opposition to unsafe conditions. "There is no social distancing here at all," one worker told the WSWS. "There is nothing protecting us but masks. Some are working 7/12s (7 days, 12 hours) ever since COVID started. People are exhausted, fatigued. They are not giving us answers. They just tell us there are no positive cases, but they won't back it up at all. They won't even tell us who has been exposed. It's all about the money."

A worker at Ford Sterling Axle north of Detroit said, "So far there have been 2 cases in the last 2 weeks. They only close the department for about a half hour to have the company DFM go in and spray down the department and they go back to work."

"On the other hand, management is cracking down hard on people not wearing their company-provided mask properly. On the days it's 95 degrees outside it feels like 115 degrees inside. They provide us with water but it makes it very hard to breathe in those masks when it's so hot."

A worker with family at the FCA Warren Truck plant north of Detroit wrote to the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "It is extremely hot in the plant, over 110 degrees... The plant Does Not have air conditioning... Having to wear the mask the entire 10-12 hours is very unhealthy. My son has stressed his concerns to HR regarding the unhealthy issue, as well as other workers... There needs to be an Immediate Resolution."

These statements express the growing anger and determination of workers throughout the auto industry and beyond. The *Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to follow the example of the workers at Jefferson North, Sterling Heights Assembly and Toledo Jeep and organize rank-and-file safety committees in their workplaces. Only the independent initiative and organization of workers can protect health and safety under conditions of the mad corporate drive for more and more production. Workers must insist that their right to healthy and safe working conditions take precedence over corporate profit.



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