

Toledo Jeep workers demand immediate shutdown as COVID-19 continues to spread in auto industry

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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.

New cases of COVID-19 continue to spread throughout auto plants in the United States, endangering the health and lives of workers and their families. Workers at the Fiat Chrysler (FCA) Toledo Jeep Assembly complex in northwestern Ohio have told the WSWs that over 60 workers have tested positive for coronavirus, but management refuses to close the giant facility, which employs nearly 7,000 workers.

Dozens of cases have been reported at the General Motors (GM) plants in Arlington, Texas—which is located in the coronavirus hotspot of the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex—and Wentzville, Missouri, near St. Louis. A Flint, Michigan assembly worker told the WSWs that there were at least seven confirmed cases. GM also refuses to close the plants, which produce highly profitable pickup trucks and SUVs. The deadly consequence of this policy is seen at the GM plant in Silao, Mexico, where at least six workers have died, according to reports from workers sent to the WSWs.

At Tesla's Fremont, California plant, more than 130 cases have been reported, and the company, which rushed to reopen on May 11 in defiance of county lockdown orders, admits that over 1,500 have been "affected," i.e., infected or exposed to someone who was infected. A worker at auto parts manufacturer DENSO in Battle Creek, Michigan died of COVID-19 in the second week of July, and at least 17 workers at five plants across the state have tested positive.

The auto corporations and the United Auto Workers union are working together to hide the real number of cases from workers in the plants, repeatedly lying that the auto plants are safe to work in and that workers who contract the coronavirus are guilty of not following safety guidelines *outside* of the plants. The UAW and auto corporations have stopped reporting the number of deaths from COVID-19 among workers in the auto plants since the premature restart of production at the Detroit-based automakers in mid-May.

Under these conditions, autoworkers have begun to take matters into their own hands, forming rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, at two Detroit area Fiat Chrysler assembly plants—Jefferson North (JNAP) and Sterling Heights (SHAP)—and at the Toledo Assembly Complex. Last week, the

safety committees issued a joint statement calling for the closure of plants where there are outbreaks and for all workers, including autoworkers, teachers, airline workers and others to build rank-and-file safety committees.

Fearing that workers will halt production to protect themselves like JNAP and SHAP workers did in late June, FCA sent out a letter Friday claiming it was taking measures with the UAW to address workers' concerns. This includes setting up an "in-plant COVID-19 Task Force," made up of a supervisor, a senior team leader and a UAW steward," that would relay workers' "questions and concerns" to senior management and the UAW leadership to "ensure issues are addressed and that none of your comments are being misinterpreted through the process."

The letter claimed there were "no secret cases in the plant" but reiterated the company's position that it would not release details of confirmed cases, hypocritically claiming to be concerned with the privacy of infected workers.

"When there is a confirmed or suspected case," the letter states, "management and union staff will meet with the teams to explain the situation and interview those who may have been in close contact. Employees who have been determined to be in close contact will be removed from the plant until medical determines final disposition. Based on the individual situation Level 1 or Level 2 cleaning will be completed after which the team will be informed."

This is nothing but another ploy to keep information about the spread of infections in the plant by isolating small groups of workers and making sure they do not inform their coworkers. Emphasizing this point, the letter instructs workers to address their concerns only to team leaders and management as this is the "fastest way to have your voice heard by the entire Leadership Team."

A Toledo Jeep worker said the UAW was colluding with management to cover up the dangers of contracting the deadly disease in the plant. UAW Local 12 Vice President Brian Sims, he said, "told us people are not getting COVID from Chrysler, that they're getting it elsewhere and bringing it here. That is a lie. These people in the media may know about 40 positive cases, but there are more.

"These union reps are company men and company women. They

are opportunists; they don't care about the members. All they care about is making deals with the boss. It's like a war against the invisible beast. They know it's not safe but they're trying to put the word out there that it is okay.

"We need to get the [COVID] test out there to everyone and test every day. That little questionnaire, that's not going to cut it," she said, referring to the form that is supposed to be used to stop symptomatic cases entering the plant. "Anyone can say they are COVID-free, and they're not, and they come to work and pass it to everyone. But they [FCA] don't want to do that because it would require a system, and change, and a lot of money."

Another worker with over 30 years at the Toledo Jeep plant explained how the company and UAW are trying to silence workers who oppose unsafe conditions. "If you raise any [concerns] at all, they're going to give you three days' [suspension], then 30, then you're out the door pretty much. They're punishing workers if you don't wear your mask or if you complain. It's happening everywhere."

He described horrific scenes of workers passing out from the heat and not being given time to take off their masks and cool down. "There was a guard, a young woman who just started, and just yesterday she passed out on the floor and was there for an hour and a half before medical came! Another man passed out on the line and they never shut the line off! They dragged him out and kept us working!"

Workers in the parts industry that supply the assembly plants described conditions that were just as bad or worse. A worker at Syncreon auto parts in Michigan said: "They tried to fire me because I tried to quarantine, and they tried to make me come back three days early. They said if I didn't come in, I would get fired and lose my position and seniority. How am I supposed to work when I am still waiting on test results? I called my steward...but they didn't care about peoples' health. It's all about money."

"They have one person doing two to three jobs per night. I used to do one route; now I do three every half hour on the hour, for ten hours straight. I haven't gotten a raise. Now they're using these cameras, that were supposed to be installed for safety, as 'big brother.' They're using it to track peoples' breaks."

To the dismay of auto executives last week, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer suggested that the auto plants in the state might have to be temporarily closed if COVID-19 cases did not slow down. On Thursday, Glenn Stevens, executive director of MICHauto, an economic development initiative of the Detroit Regional Chamber, wrote a letter to Whitmer saying, "On behalf of Michigan's automotive leaders, I urge you to resist the closure of our manufacturing facilities and allow these demonstrated safety protocols to continue working to keep our businesses open." The Detroit Regional Chamber is the local affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce, which is lobbying for businesses to be protected from any legal liabilities for sickening and killing workers.

The UAW is no different in its insistence that the plants must remain open. Eric Welter, the president of UAW Local 598 at GM Flint Assembly, told the *Detroit Free Press*, "We talk every day as GM and the UAW on keeping the workers safe and keeping the integrity of the practices in the plant safe... There's a lot of money

involved, and the last thing the automakers want is to be shut down by the government."

He continued, "There's a future at risk. There is market demand right now. People want our product and if we don't deliver that product, that's our job security. So, we have to push on, do it safely, but product demand is job security."

In other words, the UAW will not let anything get in the way of production, including the corpses of workers. The auto companies have piled up billions of dollars in profits since the 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler. This money did not go to improve the wages, let alone the working conditions, of autoworkers, but for stock buybacks and executive pay. A portion was also handed to the UAW in the form of bribes and other payoffs in return for signing contracts that cut workers' pay and increased their exploitation.

The rank-and-file safety committees insist that workers must have the right to a livelihood and safety. The plants where outbreaks have taken place should be closed with full pay guaranteed to all affected workers.

A temporary worker at the Flint Assembly plant told the WSWs: "My opinion about building a rank-and-file-safety committee is that we really need one here. I know of seven positive cases just in the small area where I work, and the union claims they know nothing. There is zero contact tracing because if they test us, we have to be off work for 3-4 days until we get the results. They wouldn't have enough workers to keep the line going. They don't care about us. They just want trucks."

"Put simply—what GM management, the UAW, and the government are trying to do is cover up the COVID-19 cases and play dumb." Like many workers, he explained that cases in the plants were only revealed when workers exchanged information on Facebook. "Workers try to warn each other."

He said that teachers should build rank-and-file safety committees too in order to fight the rush to reopen the schools. "We are the ones who need to put everything in perspective. By reopening the schools because they want the plants running, the result will be a lot of orphans. And who will take care of them if their parents die?"



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