

As the spread of COVID accelerates, Ford workers in Michigan and Kentucky denounce flouting of safety measures

Tim Rivers
25 July 2020

As the coronavirus pandemic rages across the US, doubling the pace of its spread in a matter of days, anger among rank-and-file workers is erupting at auto factories throughout the Midwest. The companies' inadequate and largely cosmetic safety measures, which enjoy the uncritical endorsement of the United Auto Workers, are being openly disregarded and cases are spiking in the plants.

On Thursday, CNBC reported that absenteeism is running so high in auto plants over coronavirus concerns that the ability of companies to continue current levels of production is in doubt. The issue is particularly sharp in Kentucky, Missouri and Michigan, where cases are surging.

On Friday, an operator in Kentucky called the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* to report a sharp rise in cases at Ford's Louisville Assembly Plant (LAP), where 4,500 workers assemble Lincoln Corsairs and Ford Escapes. "Two weeks ago we had seven cases," he said. "Last week it went to 14. Then Monday the total rose to 19. Today we heard a new-hire came to work all week long knowing he was positive. We, who are witnessing this, are getting really fed up with it... just so they can run."

The two-faced company policy, which has been in force since May, is to publicly profess to providing medical screening and personal protection, and to sanitizing contaminated areas. In practice, the only thing that matters is production. While more and more workers have gotten sick, screening and sanitizing have gone by the wayside.

The co-workers of the operator at LAP are scandalized by the situation as well, especially the failure of medical screening at the factory gate. "Didn't the temperature scanner catch it?" one asked on Facebook about the

worker who had come to work sick for a week. Another replied, "If you want to have fun, ask the person taking your temperature what it is."

When the online survey site for checking symptoms was down last Wednesday, workers just walked through without any screening. That didn't bother the company or the union.

But when the workers shut the line down last week to sanitize a contaminated work station, a manager shouted hysterically over the intercom, "Turn it on! Turn it on!" until the line was up and running again.

The union and the company are terrified of the growing influence and readership of the *Autoworker Newsletter*, which is advocating that rank-and-file safety committees take charge of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week, the *Autoworker Newsletter* exposed Ford's refusal to shut down, instead running the line at full speed while a worker in a full white sanitizing suit attempted to clean a contaminated work station close behind an assembler. "They're going up and down the line trying to figure out who sent you that photo of the Leotec worker on line 6," a worker reported.

"How come we don't have our own people running these tests?" another asked on the LAP Facebook page.

"Why even have them?" his colleague responded, referring to the lackadaisical screening of personnel. "Twenty people walked in infected. What good is it? What it does is cover Ford's liability. Hell, even Congress is passing a bill relieving companies from lawsuits. It's not about us. It's about Ford's money."

The *Autoworker Newsletter* exposed the criminal intent of pending congressional legislation in an article May 11 titled, "As US House returns to Washington, Democrats signal readiness to grant companies immunity for worker deaths."

On Thursday, a worker at Ford's Michigan Avenue Assembly Plant in Wayne, Michigan, where a worker died of COVID-19 in late March, reported to the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "In less than five hours, seven people have been sent out to get tested." All of them worked in the same area of the factory, which is a few miles west of Detroit and produces the Ford Ranger.

On Friday afternoon, a worker from the Dearborn Truck Plant outside Detroit, which produces the highly profitable F-150 pickup truck, called in to report that as he had left the plant, a union steward from UAW Local 600 gave him a leaflet announcing three new cases of COVID-19 in the plant. "There are three new cases," the worker said. "They don't even know how long they were in the plant. It doesn't tell us anything."

"Greetings Brothers and Sisters," the leaflet begins. Then, as if announcing raffle tickets for a football game, it states, "Our latest cases of Covid last week in the plant were: B Crew Chassis, A Crew Doorline and B Crew Trim." It rattles on to mention "appropriate Cleaning Protocols" and "safety stand downs" for members of the affected teams.

The purpose of the leaflet is not to inform anyone. Just the opposite, it is an attempt to normalize the spread of the deadly disease and emphasize the brutal fact that the company and the union will do nothing to protect workers.

There will be no shutdown to sanitize the factory, no universal testing, contact tracing or even a serious effort to determine how the disease is spreading in the plant. Nothing must interrupt or even slow F-150's, Ford's primary cash cow, from rolling off the assembly line.

"They are trying to blame the spread on the Fourth of July," the worker continued. "They give us the paper on the way out the door. They are really keeping everybody in the dark. It is getting unbearable. They are trying to blame us. The leaflet claims that workers are not wearing proper PPE."

A similar leaflet came out on Facebook last Tuesday at LAP. "We have 18 confirmed cases of COVID-19," reported the shop chairman. "There is additional people awaiting test results and the numbers could continue to rise daily... Cases have been reported in trim, chassis, and pre-delivery on both shifts."

The leaflet included the Ford definition of the rules regarding quarantine: "exposure to a positive COVID-19 case at less than 6 feet for an excess of 15 minutes."

The workers in Louisville are no less contemptuous of the company's so-called "safety protocols" than their

counterparts in Dearborn. "But what if they have been doing our jobs for P calls and not sanitizing anything after?" one asked. Another added, "If this wasn't a circus, they would send the entire area to be tested. But they can't afford to have an entire area out.

"I'm just worn out. The heat is unbearable and the mask makes it worse."

On Wednesday, the *Detroit Free Press* reported a similar UAW social media report posted Monday at the other Ford plant in Louisville, the Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP), which builds the larger F-series pickups. Building Chairman Allen Hughes said that 20 coronavirus cases had been confirmed in his building. Hughes and the UAW local president, Todd Dunn, were not particularly upset about the spread of the deadly virus among their members and indicated they were not going to take any measures to protect the workers.

Dunn commented that "while more than one is alarming," the total number of confirmed cases is still low when compared to the total number of workers at KTP, which is around 9,000.

In the article, Kelli Felker, Ford's Detroit-based manufacturing and labor communications manager, spelled out the incestuous relations between the union and the company and reaffirmed that the company would take absolutely no action in response to the outbreak.

"Working closely with the UAW and external experts in infectious disease and epidemiology, we developed safety protocols to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, which we follow at all Ford facilities globally," she said Wednesday in an email. "While we are aware of employees who have tested positive for COVID-19, no one identified as a close contact who was following our protocols has developed symptoms or tested positive for the virus."

The *Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to contact us to learn more about building a rank-and-file safety committee at your plant.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact