

DENSO workers describe conditions that led to COVID-19 outbreak at Michigan auto parts plant

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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.

On July 10, auto parts manufacturer DENSO acknowledged that one worker died and another 13 were infected with COVID-19 at its thermal manufacturing plant in Battle Creek, Michigan. Overall, the Japanese-based company has reported it has 124 confirmed cases at its North American plants, which produce air conditioners and other components for the Detroit Three automakers along with Toyota, Honda, Mazda, Hyundai, Audi and Caterpillar.

Following an initial report by the *World Socialist Web Site* on the outbreak at the plant in Battle Creek, Michigan, workers contacted the WSWs to describe the unsafe conditions that led the spread of the deadly disease. While DENSO tells its employees that it is following cleaning and safety protocols, rank-and-file workers have exposed the real conditions.

“DENSO claims to care about the safety of its associates, but their actions tell a completely different story,” reported one worker, who used the pseudonym Wayne to protect himself from retaliation. “Due to how long it takes to get test results back for COVID, DENSO rarely does any third-party deep cleaning. If the associate is out of work for more than seven days, they say it’s not necessary to deep clean. I also would like to point out that when there is a possible infected associate, they make that associate’s team stop and spend about 15 minutes cleaning with alcohol. That is all that is done if they think someone has COVID.”

Another worker, who also wished to remain anonymous, wrote, “We DO wear facial protection, but the heat, humidity, constantly blowing air and sweat

make the passing and incubation of this virus all too favorable. The virus is, in fact, jumping from area to area in small amounts with whole teams sometimes being quarantined.”

The high temperatures and lack of proper ventilation are creating very difficult and unsafe working conditions. “DENSO has installed thermostats in each area of the plant,” Wayne wrote, but “whether or not we get an extra break due to the heat depends on what the temperature is in your area. However, the thermostats are barely a couple feet off the floor, where it is obviously cooler. That is how DENSO has found a way to no longer give heat stress breaks.”

Disease transmission is made more likely by the way the company mandates water breaks. The anonymous worker wrote, “The heat is unbearable, and DENSO refuses to provide its employees with cold water. We now have to either spend \$1.50 every two hours to buy a bottle of water or you can join everyone else in line at the drinking fountains to refill your old one. So now everyone is either touching the vending machines or the drinking fountains, which I have never seen being cleaned.”

Inside the factory, sweltering conditions make it hard to observe social distancing guidelines. The worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Our fans are old and most of them can barely be felt from your work station, the amount of sweat is insane. It’s constantly running down our faces and into our eyes, causing us to touch our faces all day long. The heat and resulting fatigue increase our stress, lowering our rest and overall health and immunity. It is ironic that though we manufacture HVAC systems, our plant has no cooling system in place. Many of us do not know where to seek help

when those who decide our work conditions are themselves offed in climate-controlled accommodations; caring only about their bottom line."

Workers also described the grueling work schedules they face. "Our product number requirements are being increased exponentially without reason, and, as a result, our work hours are being increased to seven days in many areas and 12-hour shifts. We are living through a time of pandemic; some of us wait for the weekend to do important things we can't during the week (like grocery shopping or spending time caring for our children, families, and selves). Those working second shift are COMPLETELY unable to shop for food and necessities after work and have so little time to sleep that we only have enough time to wake up and prepare for work," the worker wrote.

Wayne explained how the company threw caution to the wind once demand increased. "After the shutdown ended in May, we were called back to come to work. We were told it would be on a reduced schedule, bringing half the people back to work on Monday and Tuesday and the other half was to work on Wednesday and Thursday. That lasted one day. After the first day, we were told that DENSO was back on full production, and the entire team was to report to work every day."

During the coronavirus lockdown mandated by Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, DENSO instituted a policy of continuing to pay its employees while they were not working. But there was more to this policy than meets the eye. "They were protecting their reputation for never once having to furlough or having a mass layoff of people," Wayne wrote. "They did pay us, for 32 hours a week, but with the amount of [overtime] they usually make us work, they paid us the bare minimum. Then they tried to lower the 32 hours a week down to 24, which would have caused every single person who works for them to struggle."

The DENSO Manufacturing Michigan plant and large sections of the auto parts industry are nonunion. This is largely due to the betrayal of a series of auto parts strikes during the 1980s by the United Auto Workers union, which openly collaborated with GM, Ford and Chrysler to reduce labor costs in the parts industry. In unionized parts companies like Lear, Faurecia, Nexteer and others, the UAW has overseen decades of wage and benefit cuts and the proliferation of low-paid temporary and contract labor.

Autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North, Sterling Heights and Toledo Jeep assembly plants have organized rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, to fight the pandemic and protect their lives. Auto parts workers at DENSO and other component manufacturers should follow the lead of the FCA workers and establish their own safety committees.

When asked about the idea of rank-and-file committees, Wayne wrote, "I think it's a good idea and given enough time and support could blossom into something great. ... Something has to be done."



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