

GM keeps third shift at Missouri plant as anger mounts over unsafe conditions

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29 July 2020

US automaker General Motors announced Tuesday it will keep the third shift at its Wentzville, Missouri, plant in operation. Earlier this month, GM announced its intention to temporarily eliminate the third shift of about 1,250 workers, many of whom are temps, as COVID-19 cases surged at the facility and large numbers of workers who feared infection stayed home.

COVID-19 is spreading out of control in Missouri, as it is across the US. No systematic testing for the virus or contact tracing is taking place in the Wentzville plant. Asymptomatic workers can potentially spread the infection because social distancing during production is virtually impossible.

For the ninth time in July, the state of Missouri reported a record number of COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, averaging more than 1,400 new cases a day. Wentzville was one of three areas in St. Charles County singled out by the St. Louis Pandemic Task Force as a COVID-19 hot spot. State health officials are calling for “aggressive actions” as the seven-day average of COVID-19 infected in the state reached 8.8 percent.

But despite the rapid growth of infections in the region and calls by workers to shut down the plant under the unsafe conditions, GM is keeping its St. Louis-area factory operating round the clock on all three shifts.

Autoworkers are reportedly being transferred to Wentzville from Spring Hill, Tennessee, where a shift is being cut at another General Motors plant, and from the Detroit-Hamtramck GM facility, in addition to hiring in more temporary workers. More than 500 production and skilled trades workers and 155 temps are being let go this week in Spring Hill due to falling demand.

A GM Wentzville worker told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, “We are about to get 250 or

more from Spring Hill. They’re supposedly making 50-something temps already here permanent, bringing back some laid off temps and they are still hiring off the street.

Saying that mandatory overtime was being enforced two out of three Saturdays, they continued, “Every day, they ask for early or late overtime.”

Opposition among workers has been mounting as the auto companies and the UAW demand the sacrifice of lives and health to keep production running.

Autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler’s Jefferson North, Sterling Heights and Toledo Jeep assembly plants have recently launched a fight for safe working conditions, organizing rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and opposed to the pro-management UAW. The committees have issued a series of demands, including immediate notification of new cases, 24-hour shutdowns of plants for deep cleaning, 10-minute cooldowns every hour, universal testing, and an end to retaliation against workers who speak out on unsafe conditions.

At Wentzville, as at the vast majority of workplaces, GM has blacked out information on new coronavirus cases. Media outlets such as the *Detroit Free Press* have reported that the company’s policy is to not confirm the number of cases at its plants.

Although UAW Local 2250 Chairperson Alan Chambliss reportedly communicated late last week that 44 workers had tested positive for COVID-19 at GM Wentzville, workers at the plant widely suspect the figure to be much higher. The factory has more than 4,000 workers.

Commenting on Chambliss’ role, the GM worker said, “Everyone is saying Alan ‘Trump’ Chambliss has been working with management all along and is using the cancellation of the layoffs as his platform for

reelection [as UAW local chairperson].”

When the coronavirus initially erupted earlier this year, the Wentzville plant was closed temporarily beginning in mid-March, after workers forced the shutdown of the auto industry through a series of wildcat strikes and job actions. Production was restarted in May under the whip of the Trump administration’s homicidal “back-to-work” campaign, which enjoys bipartisan support among state and federal officials.

GM’s decision to keep the third shift is driven in part by an inventory shortfall of its highly profitable pickups, arising from both the two-month shutdown this year and the 40-day strike by autoworkers against the company last fall. While sales in recent months have not fallen as much as industry analysts’ worst-case predictions, tens of millions remain out of work and face financial ruin with the end of the \$600 federal unemployment supplemental aid. If sales again decline, the company will not hesitate to carry out new attacks on jobs and working conditions.

More fundamental to GM’s effort to increase production at Wentzville, and in the aggressive effort to re-open the economy more broadly, are ballooning corporate debt and the profit demands of Wall Street investors.

CNBC reported Tuesday that GM and Ford doubled their corporate debt in the first months of this year, to \$30 billion, and investors are watching how quickly that debt can be paid down before the end of the year. This requires a major increase in cash flow.

GM is expected to announce losses close to \$2.9 billion on Wednesday. One auto industry analyst from Merrill Lynch declared the second quarter of 2020 is “likely to be the toughest in modern history” in which automakers “grappled with close to a zero revenue environment for a few months.”

At the same time, Wall Street is pressing corporate executives to spell out in detail further restructuring and cost-cutting measures. GM’s Chief Financial Officer, Dhivya Suryadevara, told CNBC the company has “aggressively reduced” costs and is on track to cut spending by \$6 billion by the end of the year.

In their relentless pursuit of profit, corporate leaders and the financial aristocracy have judged workers’ lives to be acceptable losses. At the same time, the UAW has been working diligently with the automakers

to try to control the rapidly growing opposition among workers to the dangerous plant conditions.

In a recent interview with the *Detroit Free Press*, UAW President Rory Gamble, who is currently the target of federal investigation in a massive corruption scandal, sought to discourage eligible workers from taking early retirement, aiming to assist the companies in keeping workers in the plants despite the clear dangers to their health.

Gamble’s admonition was echoed by Spring Hill’s UAW Local 1853 Chairman Mike Herron, who stated on Monday workers should not take the very retirement buyouts management and UAW have been pushing on older workers for decades. “The biggest concern that I have today for active UAW team members is that they are no longer working for a pension,” Herron said, expecting workers to forget the UAW’s role in eliminating pensions for new hires, along with numerous other attacks on workers over decades.

GM Wentzville workers should follow the lead given by the FCA workers and establish their own safety committees in order to enforce safe working conditions. For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your factory, contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* at autoworkers@wsws.org.



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