

COVID-19 deaths mount at GM plant and maquiladoras across Mexico

Andrea Lobo
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The re-opening of manufacturing plants and other workplaces across Mexico led by the administration of president Andrés Manuel López Obrador has resulted in a devastating upsurge of the COVID-19 pandemic across auto plants and maquiladora sweatshops that supply the highly interconnected North American economy.

In the month of June, exports increased 76 percent, while confirmed COVID-19 cases in Mexico soared from 90,000 to 230,000. This week, coronavirus cases shot past 400,000 and deaths surpassed 45,000. Only the US, Brazil and the UK have recorded more deaths.

These figures are widely recognized to be a vast underestimation of the infection and death toll due to lack of testing. For instance, data from *The Economist* based on excess deaths as of July 6 found that 78 percent of deaths linked to the COVID-19 pandemic were not reported in Mexico City.

At the General Motors Complex in Silao, where workers assemble GM's most profitable pickup trucks, the Generando Movimiento (Generating Movement) rank-and-file group reported to the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* that the seventh worker at the plant had died from COVID-19. The company and the trade unions have denied any deaths.

Workers who live in the neighborhood of the latest victim found out about her death when she was buried last Saturday. "Her family members say that she got infected of COVID at GM. All her family is now infected," one worker wrote. "Her name was Rocío and she was barely at the West Hall"—the training and testing area for new hires.

Expressing sorrow for her death, several co-workers denounced the company for placing "production above everything else." Generating Movement explained that the plant is running at 100 percent capacity, even

though the state of Guanajuato, where the plant is located, is on "red" alert over COVID-19. This ostensibly means automakers can only run at 30 percent of capacity. "To compensate for vulnerable workers [those off work because of health conditions], others are being forced to work overtime," the group explained.

Across the United States, GM has struggled with high absenteeism as workers oppose being exposed to the virus. At the plants in Flint, Michigan and Fort Wayne, Indiana, which produce Silverado and Sierra pickup trucks like those built in Silao, GM increased production to three shifts last month and added Saturday shifts "to increase supply of its profit-rich trucks," indicated by *Detroit News*.

Recognizing the importance of a joint struggle against the reckless drive to expand production across North America, the Generating Movement group at Silao told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "We oppose the claim made by the UAW [United Auto Workers] that the plants in the United States must stay open, placing production above workers' safety." This refers to a recent statement by UAW Local 598 President at GM Flint Assembly, Eric Welter, who said workers must "push on," adding, "People want our product and if we don't deliver that product, that's our job security."

Once the pandemic began to sweep across manufacturing plants and other workplaces, the North American auto industry was only shut down by a wave of wildcat strikes across the United States and Canada that began in mid-March and spread in early April across Mexican sweatshop maquiladoras. These independent actions by workers, against the resistance of management, the governments and the trade unions, saved countless lives.

Shortly after the auto industry in the US and Canada

re-opened, the López Obrador government bowed to the demands from the Trump administration and declared that production of cars, auto parts and other key supplies for US corporations was “essential.” This has led to widespread outbreaks across Mexican plants that the corporations and their union stooges are covering up.

In Matamoros, which borders Brownsville, Texas, workers at a maquiladora that makes car battery chargers for US-based Schumex-Shumacher reported to the *Autoworker Newsletter* a second COVID-19 death. “Infections are on the rise here. On top of the union delegate, a co-worker recently passed away from COVID. Massive infections and deaths are being reported at other Matamoros companies.”

The Schumex plant closed only in April after workers staged a wildcat strike. However, production re-started almost immediately for “volunteers” by offering a bonus. “Most co-workers who got infected worked during the most critical stage of the quarantine,” the worker explained. “We have hand sanitizer all over the plant, get sanitized when entering and leaving, but facemasks are of terrible quality. The medical and administrative staff get N95 facemasks and shields. We, the workers, are replaceable.”

At the auto parts plant Tridonex Cardone in Matamoros, workers carried out several wildcat strikes this month to oppose the coverup of a COVID-19 outbreak by management, which has fired dozens of militants. Last week, workers reported three new COVID-19 deaths on their social media groups, bringing the total to five.

“The maquiladora continues to operate at full capacity; only the workshop area was closed,” a worker wrote on Facebook. Another added: “What a shame! I was able to meet two of those excellent people and co-workers. It truly makes me angry how the company acts like nothing is going on and only cares about production.”

In Ciudad Juárez, which borders El Paso, Texas, workers at Lear Corporation’s Río Bravo maquiladora, which makes car seat covers, reported that social distancing measures are not being enforced either inside the plant or in buses that transport workers to their jobs. Before the plant closed temporarily in late March, a COVID-19 outbreak resulted in at least 20 deaths.

The health authorities are helping cover up the deaths among workers. Last week, the secretary of health of the state of Chihuahua, where Ciudad Juárez is located, claimed that COVID-19 deaths among maquiladora workers in the state had increased from 17 to 25 since the June 1 federal reopening. However, investigative journalists at *La Verdad* had documented at least 27 deaths by mid-May in only two maquiladoras, including Río Bravo.

Companies have also had a free hand at firing workers who protest the lack of health protections. At least ten workers at the Swedish-based refrigerator manufacturer Electrolux in Ciudad Juárez denounced the corporation for firing and blacklisting them after protesting on April 7. The plant closed temporarily in response to unrest, but only after two workers had already succumbed to COVID-19.

A fired Electrolux worker told *Mexico Webcast*: “We demanded safety measures since there were no good conditions [to work]; no one was wearing masks or had hand sanitizer. There was no safe distancing. All workers left in group and traveled on buses without safety measures.”

Laurie Ann Ziménez-Fyvie, a top Microbiology researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), warned *Forbes México* on Tuesday of a “catastrophic” scenario if the economic reopening and lack of testing continues into October, the beginning of the flu season that lasts until March 2021. This would “highly compromise hospital occupancy and radically increase deaths,” she said.

“The government should not have forced its citizens to choose between going out to work in order to eat or get infected with COVID. People need to have assistance and the appropriate safety measures: information to better take care of themselves, supplies and economic support,” Ziménez-Fyvie concluded.



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