

Brook Park, Ohio autoworker describes conditions leading to rising COVID-19 infections at Ford Engine plant

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The World Socialist Web Site *Autoworker Newsletter* recently spoke to a worker from the Ford engine plant in Brook Park, Ohio about the unsafe conditions that are leading to the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus at the facility. While the company has told the employees that they are following cleaning and safety protocols, rank-and-file workers have exposed the real conditions.

Located in a suburb of Cleveland, the Ford Brook Park engine plant opened in 1951 and currently employs roughly 1,750 workers, mostly hourly employees. The plant ran until 2007 when it was idled for two years, reopening in 2009 with a \$55 million investment to begin production of the "EcoBoost" engine, which advertises lower emissions and more fuel economy. Two distinct Ford plants resided on the same property, until the closure of the second plant in 2012.

The rising toll of cases at the Brook Park plant takes place as COVID-19 infections are surging across Ohio. There are reports of cases at the Ford Avon Lake plant as well as a rising number of cases at the Fiat Chrysler Jeep operations in Toledo. According to an internal email, American Honda in Marysville recently ordered office staff to work on assembly lines due to COVID-19 related manpower shortages.

"I would guess we've had at least 100 COVID cases. No one will tell us if there are cases because the union doesn't want us to know," the engine plant worker said. He chose to be interviewed under a pseudonym, Mark, to protect him from possible retaliation. He added, "About 200 of us are laid off right now, an entire shift."

"I've been out on quarantine since Thursday because one of my relatives came down with COVID. At first they were only allowing three days off for quarantine if you were exposed. They increased it to 14 days now, with pay, but it's a one-time deal. If I get sick in two weeks, I'll

have to go out on medical."

Mark explained how the company is not following proper cleaning protocols. "Last week a woman on our team got sick, throwing up on the line. They sent her to medical and then the hospital, but we just had to keep running. They told us it wasn't COVID, that it was some reaction to her medication. There was no clean-up crew. They aren't worried about us. They are only worried about the motors."

"We shouldn't have to clean up our own stations either. They should hire someone who knows how to do that. They tell us we can't rotate unless we clean our stations and we have to rotate because if you don't there is a lot of wear and tear on one part of your body."

Mark has complained several times to management and the United Auto Workers about safety issues he notices in the plant. "We have to push open these gates every morning. I told the union that the gates need to be cleaned after each worker goes through. They told me that the gates are cleaned twice a day. I told them if they can't clean the gates properly then we shouldn't be using them. Nothing is being done about it. That means if one worker is sick, everyone behind him in line is going to touch the same spot to open the gate."

"Also there is a big bin of dirty masks close to where we enter and exit. There should be a biohazard bag. I've brought that up too."

He continued, "We got inspected by the health department recently because four people came down with COVID-19. We ended up getting a great mark, and there are so many safety issues. I asked the union to send someone from the health department to talk to me because I'd like to tell them some things I'm concerned about. He didn't send anybody over obviously. The UAW is with the management, that's clear."

The basic safety measures that are in place at Ford Engine are rarely working properly. “We go through a trailer to enter the plant where they scan our temperature. Last Wednesday, the machine wasn’t even working. It doesn’t matter to management. They can just fill their pockets up if we’re at work. They don’t care about us.”

Mark added, “Even before COVID, people were getting hurt every day. Paramedics come through and pick people up.”

Another factor contributing to unsafe and difficult working conditions are the high temperatures and lack of proper ventilation. Mark said, “It’s tough to wear the mask and glasses in the heat. Our plant is climate controlled but it’s still about 100 degrees. The only reason it’s climate controlled is because the motors need to be kept cool.”

“A lot of work stations don’t even have fans. Our team ordered three fans about eight months ago. Just last week I asked the plant supervisor about it and she claimed someone stole them.”

This reporter explained that workers at Detroit-area Fiat Chrysler plants had established rank-and-file safety committees independent of the UAW and management to fight for a healthy and safe workplace. These committees have demanded full disclosure of COVID-19 cases; for production to be halted for cleaning when infections occur; and regular, universal testing.

Mark said, “Even before COVID, we needed a safety committee. It’s important. We need something. It’s not impossible to make this place safe. If the union wasn’t too afraid to do something, we could fix this place up. Something has to be done.”

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.



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