

Fiat Chrysler workers speak out on COVID-19 outbreak at Belvidere Assembly Plant

Jessica Goldstein
10 August 2020

On Saturday, health officials in Boone and Winnebago counties in northern Illinois announced an investigation into a possible COVID-19 outbreak at the Fiat Chrysler (FCA) Belvidere Assembly Plant, one of the largest employers in the area.

The investigation is a response to an uptick in daily new case counts in the area surrounding the plant. The preliminary seven-day test positivity rate currently stands at 6.7 percent in Boone County, where the plant is located, and 3.8 percent in Winnebago County directly to the west.

Officials have not revealed the number of autoworkers who have tested positive at the plant since production restarted prematurely at the beginning of June. Fiat Chrysler and the United Auto Workers union, who are the subject of a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme alleged in court by General Motors last week, together with the rest of the auto industry and the corporate press, have actively suppressed news of confirmed cases in the domestic and internationally based auto plants since production started up again after nationwide restrictions on nonessential business were lifted.

Workers at the plant come from Illinois and southern Wisconsin, and local health officials have noted that Wisconsin counties just north of the state line are also reporting higher rates of positive tests for COVID-19 than counties south of the state line in Illinois. Overall, both states have seen rising weekly new case counts.

The restart of production in US auto plants has had devastating consequences for autoworkers and their families. The coronavirus spreads unchecked, which proves that the so-called "safety measures" by the auto corporations, implemented with the support of the UAW, have been completely ineffective against the transmission of the virus in the plants, where thousands of workers in

the facility work in close contact with one another for 10-12 hours per day.

Autoworkers at Belvidere Assembly spoke out against the deadly conditions of the return to work, driven by the profit interests of FCA and its Wall Street investors.

"Misinformation and communication from the company and union to the employees is pretty bad," a worker at the plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. "Someone in the Paint Department tested positive for COVID-19. The company and union took them out of the plant secretly and didn't even tell the team, but she went on Facebook to tell us she had COVID-19. We're doing what workers at Toledo Jeep [Assembly Plant] are doing, by using social media to tell each other."

"There was a wildcat [action] Wednesday with about four to six people on first shift. The hazmat team came in, then the entire team walked out."

The experiences of workers at the plant reveal that, contrary to public statements by FCA, no contact tracing, cleaning or social distancing guidelines are being followed.

"FCA and the UAW Local say their reason for not saying anything about [positive cases] is because of HIPAA [Health Information Portability and Accountability Act] violations. That has nothing to do with anything; it's freedom of speech."

"A lot of people shared the [*Autoworker Newsletter*] article on Toledo on our Facebook page. We said, 'Holy cow, this is happening right now.' I've been telling people we're not alone; Toledo and Sterling Heights are going through what we are. The demands those committees made are perfectly logical."

"Not telling the workers about who has been infected helps spread the virus even more. It's an endangerment to your life and an endangerment to the people around you."

People are dying. So, it's like contain it, and stop the spread.

"As soon as the first person got COVID-19, they upped production and went to mandatory Saturdays and some Sundays. The Jeep Cherokee is not selling. We were laid off multiple times because of sales. Now we're back running full force. We all know it's because of profit. Regardless, these cars are going to go sit in car lots."

FCA has implemented deep cuts over the past two years at Belvidere Assembly, and the closure of the facility altogether in the coming years remains a possibility. The third "C" shift was eliminated at the plant in May of 2019, and UAW Local 1268 did absolutely nothing to stop the job cuts, ensuring that they would be carried out.

The plant was also hit with a series of temporary shutdowns in the first two months of 2020 prior to the pandemic. These temporary layoffs were preceded by a two-week shutdown of FCA's Windsor Assembly plant in Canada, which employs 6,500 people.

"A few weeks ago, a lot of people were worried and called off. Tomasz Gebka, our plant manager until recently, called everyone and said we needed to come in. We had people doubling up on jobs and some supervisors were on the line.

"Now they're cutting our ten minutes from lunch, and later on they said they're cutting the extra five minutes from our other breaks. What about the factor of social distancing? You're back to having a line of people going into the bathrooms at lunch. They're pinching pennies, they're pinching minutes, because one minute makes one car.

"They're making it seem like the cars are worth more than our lives. It's all about profit. This is a pandemic, this is worldwide."

Another worker at the plant said about the working conditions: "[Safety] protocol is a joke. We're asked to sign these waivers stating we're not sick and everyone just signs them so they can work instead of going home. It's not clear what happens if you say yes, if you get paid time off. We haven't gotten any details on what happens and no help. I haven't been able to get any reply from my committeeman.

"They're not sanitizing or inspecting the workstations. We're given 10 minutes before and after break to clean. This isn't being enforced or even inspected. The bathrooms have no soap in the dispensers. But there are all these signs around referring to 'keeping us safe'. It's a joke."

Winnebago County was issued a "warning level" for the

spread of COVID-19 by the Illinois Department of Public Health on Friday, which is issued when two or more of the state's COVID-19 risk indicators have increased. The Illinois state government reports 13 counties at a warning level, according to Friday press reports.

But just ten days prior, Winnebago County Health Department director Dr. Sandra Martell insisted that in-person classes for students could resume in the fall, stating that "Schools will have to coexist with COVID."

"It's madness," the worker responded. "My daughter is school-aged. I'm not sure if she's going back yet or will be at home doing online learning, but my wife and I both work. It is highly unlikely we can stay at home with her and take pay cuts.

"I saw a picture posted from a student in Georgia where students were packed in a hallway without distancing and many without masks. She was given a suspension. How could that be unauthorized? There should be full transparency of what's going on in the schools for students and for teachers."

To fight against the conditions causing life-threatening outbreaks at auto plants, workers across the Midwestern US have opposed the UAW and taken matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees to fight for the right to a safe workplace. These committees must link up with teachers, food production and meatpacking workers, transit and logistics workers, and all other sections of industrial workers internationally to end the devastating impact of the pandemic and its underlying cause, the capitalist system of exploitation. For help forming a committee at your workplace, contact the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact