Workers denounce cover-up and intimidation around COVID-19 infections at Fiat Chrysler Belvidere plant

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Autoworkers continue to raise the alarm over COVID-19 infections at the Fiat Chrysler Belvidere assembly plant in northern Illinois, fearing danger to themselves, coworkers, their families and the wider community.

Workers say they are not being informed of the real number of infections or affected departments, only gleaning information through word of mouth. They charge there is an unspoken policy of silence around infections and that management is attempting to silence those who voice concerns.

A Belvidere assembly worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, "We know there have been infections in the plant in certain departments, in the paint shop, but we don't know who's been ill. People are still getting infected.

"They're not offering any information to us. It feels like there's unspoken rule not to talk about it. You can sense the pressure. It's tense. People are afraid to report illness or injury."

The worker also noted that administrative staff are working from home, but production workers are being forced to accept huge risks even as the resources available to them are cut: "The admin offices in our building are closed. They're not in their cubicles. If you have a question or an issue for admin, you have to put it in a little box. Are those lives more valuable? I don't think so.

"We're putting our lives on the line and those of our families. We're taking all of the risks and they're reaping all the rewards with propaganda filling in the gaps. Some people say there's no need for masks. They're wrong."

The plant draws workers from a number of towns and counties in both Illinois and Wisconsin serving as a vector of COVID-19 infection for many communities in the two states. This week Boone and Winnebago counties launched a joint investigation into the infections at the plant.

FCA claims it is following the same safety and sanitation protocols at Belvidere as it does across all FCA plants, a claim that Belvidere workers describe as a joke.

A Belvidere worker whose team was exposed to COVID-19 told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "A team leader's wife who works at the plant part time was sick for an entire week. She got tested and was confirmed positive by the end of the week. The team leader called fellow employees on the weekend to let them know of potential exposure. The team leader called in the following week due to exposure, but FCA medical did **not** recommend that he get tested even though his spouse was positive.

"He got tested on his own accord and tested positive as well, meaning the whole team was exposed for about a week or so. Management was informed prior to our team being quarantined that the team leader would likely test positive and that we were potentially spreading the virus and nothing was done. We worked for three days during the waiting period for the team leader's results before management confirmed that he and his wife were positive, despite knowing he was in direct contact.

"For days, the whole team was in contact with multiple people. We're always short and we are having to train on a weekly basis. When management let us

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know the team leader tested positive, the news was delivered to us by a manager who yelled at us for being upset about the risks to our fellow workers.

"If we had not pressed the issue, we would not have been quarantined. I understand a lot of medical information is protected, but with a communicable disease, I think more transparency is needed. Another person on the team has tested positive and more are pending results."

Another Belvidere worker spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter* making a similar point. "Usually if something happens and a member is sick or faces a difficulty, we are informed about it and we organize support for them and charitable organizations get involved. But not now? It's very strange."

Workers complaining about the silence and intimidation in the plant around COVID-19 infections also note that the atmosphere can be oppressive. FCA Belvidere is known among autoworkers for being a place where union and management bully and threaten workers to keep profits up and the line moving regardless.

A former FCA Belvidere worker speaking to the *Autoworker Newsletter* said, "If you can work in Belvidere you can survive anything. The UAW there is like gangsters. They let management in the union hall on many occasions and they're all buddy-buddy. It is so shameful. When I spoke up, I was threatened with being taken to a cornfield. I said, I don't care about your cornfield. We have rights."

In the face of the seriousness of the pandemic and the economic pressures workers are facing, workers are determined to be better informed and reach out to their brothers and sisters across the auto industry and in other sectors as well.

Belvidere public schools, where about 9,000 children are enrolled, will be doing remote learning for the first nine weeks of the coming school year. Teachers in the neighboring town of Rockford, Illinois have protested reopening of the schools and are pressing for fully online learning. The teachers' union has agreed to half of that district's more than 28,000 students learning online, but older children will go to school two days a week.

For working families, there is an element of unreality to the back to school plans. As in the early stages of the pandemic, there is no planning or response from the state, municipalities and corporations that would allow children to be supervised while learning online at home. Parents are pressured to put children in school because employers want to keep production going.

Neither workplaces nor schools are safe and a socially explosive situation has emerged as opposition to the official policy of "herd immunity," supported by Democrats and Republicans, is increasing.

In the fight against life-threatening working conditions, autoworkers across the Midwest are opposing management and UAW and are taking matters into their own hands, forming rank-and-file safety committees to fight for the right to a safe workplace.

These committees must link up with teachers, and students, healthcare workers, postal workers and letter carriers, meatpacking, transit and logistics workers in the US and internationally to ensure health and safety and complete access to all information on the spread of the pandemic. The watchword must be the right to life takes precedence over the profit drive of big business.

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