

UAW announces COVID outbreak at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville with 32 new cases

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The Ford Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) in Louisville with nearly 9,000 workers has reported 32 new COVID-19 cases last Thursday. Workers at KTP assemble the Super Duty trucks, Lincoln Navigator, and Ford Expedition. The news was reported through the United Auto Workers union acting as the human resource department information portal for Ford.

Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, a Democrat, announced a record high 1,163 COVID-19 cases in the state Wednesday. Kentucky is on the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut tri-state list for a two-week mandatory quarantine requirement for travelers.

Worker comments revealed that they were not surprised by the announcement of the thirty-two COVID-19 cases considering the lack of effective safety measures. One worker posted on the local union's Facebook page, "Yeah, they really care about our health and safety." A skilled trades worker at KTP spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the lack of information on coronavirus infections at the plant saying, "I have not heard anything from either management or UAW." Adding, "I used to get emails about it, but not lately."

The widening scale of the COVID-19 crisis in manufacturing has also revealed itself at the nearby Louisville Assembly Plant, which produces the Ford Escape and Lincoln Corsair SUVs. It reported 25 new cases of COVID-19 at the plant that has over 4,000 employees.

In comments to local media that reflect the UAW's disregard for the lives of workers and their families, Local 862 president Todd Dunn callously attempted to shift the blame onto workers that were on vacations and traveling during the scheduled plant shutdowns for the

outbreak stating, "I think just out of the sheer numbers and the travel. I mean, it was somewhat expected, I think, by everybody."

According to a Ford Labor Relations Bulletin posted on Facebook, addressing all workers on the A-crew shift at KTP, some will be forced work mandatory shifts of up to 11.5 hours beginning August 16, a Sunday. The company is placing the blame on "volume," but it is likely intended to make up for the lack of manpower due to the rising numbers of those out because of illness. Workers' social media comments revealed their hostility to their being forced to work longer hours in unsafe conditions with one worker writing ironically, "Wonderful."

This past July 13, Ford announced a hiring campaign for hourly production team member positions at KTP, where the starting hourly wage is a poverty-level \$16.67 per hour at up to 10 hours per day, with no overtime pay for time worked after 8 hours, and no medical coverage until after 90 days on the job. With the number of coronavirus cases increasing at the factory, this would likely allow the company to save money on insurance costs if a worker does become ill before working 90 days. One worker commented on the job listing posted on the Facebook page of UAW Local 862 and Ford's description of the position, "This does not accurately describe the situation a new worker will be walking into." A fellow worker expressed the reality that new workers were facing when they replied, "Sshhhhh, you will ruin the surprise."

Todd Dunn was quoted on his expectation of a return to pre-COVID-19 production levels in a July 10 article in the *Detroit Free Press*. He noted the engine shortage caused by the COVID-19 outbreak in Mexico and the

resulting government-mandated 50 percent staffing reduction at Ford's Chihuahua Engine Plant. "It's always a challenge because we're back to pre-COVID sales." In the same article an industry analyst described the integrated nature of the industry and Ford's exploitation of Mexican workers, "Because labor costs are lower south of the border," he explained, "auto companies use fewer robots and more workers who pack tightly into factories."

The local media reported that workers have spoken to them on condition of anonymity because of fear of retaliation for commenting on the loosening of safety measures. Management no longer requires a plant shutdown for cleaning after positive cases of COVID-19 are discovered and management has failed to implement proper social distancing. One worker stated, "Right when we came back it was ... shut down for 24 hours if we get a positive case." Remarking on the current situation he added, "But the second we got that first positive case, nothing happened. There was no shutdown." The worker continued, "They would shut down the line in that area and do spot cleaning, which is just cleaning that person's [workspace], and that's it."

Ford KTP workers have taken the measure of the UAW and largely abstained from voting in the local union elections after the UAW rendered support for the company's back-to-work drive. One worker noted the low turnout in a Facebook posting writing, "Not a lot of enthusiasm for the candidates, it seems."

A Facebook comment posted by a worker at trucking firm YRC expressed agreement with the Autoworkers Rank-and-file Safety Committee Network statement, in particular that the companies are fraudulently hiding behind HIPPA privacy regulations to cover up COVID cases. "Exactly what I have been trying to explain to this company for months now, however, they keep screaming HIPPA laws." The worker insisted that what autoworkers are demanding is common across industries, "I explain, we don't care who it is, or their medical history, we just want to know if there are any positive cases, but they still wish to keep it from us."

Workers at plants and across the auto industry are beginning to take forward the formation of rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions. The WSWS will do everything in its power to help workers form these committees and forge links with workers

across industries and internationally.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers at Ford's Louisville factories to join workers at Ford factories in Detroit and Chicago and other auto plants in forming rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions to protect their lives and those of their families. Contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



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