“They are killing people to save money”

Fiat Chrysler, UAW conspire to keep workers on the job after exposure to coronavirus

Shannon Jones
22 August 2020

Workers at Detroit area auto plants report that the Fiat Chrysler management and the United Auto Workers union are forcing workers to stay on the job after exposure to coronavirus.

According to multiple accounts by autoworkers, both on social media and reported separately to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, the union and management are refusing to inform workers that coworkers are infected with the virus or to send workers into quarantine after exposure, as prescribed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Workers have even been told not to report illness to coworkers.

The abandonment of COVID-19 protections in auto plants takes place as the Trump administration and Democratic governors across the United States are working together to force a deadly reopening of schools. On Tuesday the Department of Homeland Security issued guidelines declaring teachers “critical infrastructure,” enabling states to force teachers that have been exposed to the deadly virus to continue work, potentially infecting others.

Democratic governors in New York, Michigan and other states have encouraged public schools to reopen despite mounting resistance on the part of teachers and parents.

At Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP), according to Facebook posts and confirmed by workers in the plant, management refused to ask a plant worker to self-quarantine even though she was exposed to another worker on her team who tested positive for COVID-19.

A worker at FCA’s Toledo Jeep plant reported that no less than three workers on their team had tested positive for coronavirus, but management failed to inform the rest of the team, much less ask them to self-quarantine. “There should be a lawsuit. This is beyond inexcusable,” the worker said.

A worker at the FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant north of Detroit told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*: “Last week they sent a whole line home that was supposed to be exposed, but before they left they trained their replacements. They are not following guidelines.

“They are bringing us back without even testing us. We may or may not have the virus. If you say you have no symptoms they send you back.

“I think the UAW is on the side of management. All they care about is lining their pockets. What’s happening is that if someone has come into contact with someone else (with COVID), they are asking you not to tell anyone; the union rep is telling us not to tell anyone. What happens to those people they came into contact with?”

Fiat Chrysler is winding down even the limited and inadequate safety protocols implemented after the restart of production in May. This week, JNAP’s labor relations department announced that the extra five minutes added to breaks for cleaning and social distancing in the lunchroom and break areas will be eliminated as of September 1. Similar memos have reportedly been sent to workers at other FCA factories.

A younger worker at JNAP told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* that workers were in an uproar about the elimination of the extra five minutes for breaks. “That extra five minutes added to a 12 minute break is life changing. Going to the bathroom was at least five minutes, that only left you 7 minutes. You didn’t even have time to go to a vending machine.

“Almost all the protocols are now gone. It seems odd, because COVID is not gone. The first week we came back we had 20 minutes to clean our work areas before the shift. They gave us special gloves. They are now doing

© World Socialist Web Site

away with anything that hurts productivity. We even had to fight to get the cleaning supplies back. I wish they would just be honest and come out and say that their money is more important than our lives."

In response to the latest revelations, the Jefferson North Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee, established by autoworkers in June after wildcat strikes against safety conditions briefly shut production at the plant for the second time this year, issued the following statement:

"The Jefferson North Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee wants to bring to light the misrepresentation from the UAW and FCA about the handling of COVID cases and exposure of employees. Most of the processes they earlier implemented in the case of exposure to COVID have been eliminated.

"Even as it stands the safety measures in place are totally inadequate. Since the return to work management and the UAW have been covering up the real extent of the spread of COVID in the plants even though timely notification of all COVID infections is critical for maintaining workers health and safety.

"Now workers have been told by plant safety that while they were potentially exposed to the virus by other team members, the company will not send them out to self quarantine for 14 days as previously required or clean their work area. This is unacceptable!

"Slowly but surely FCA is returning to the procedures that were in effect before workers stopped production in March. As of September 1 management is eliminating the extra five minutes added to each break to give employees time to get to restrooms and social distance as well as find lunch tables.

"It's been rumored the company has made changes because employees aren't cleaning, but what isn't being said is that for weeks the company hasn't supplied cleaning products and have empty bottles at work areas. We deem this unacceptable and demand both the UAW and FCA follow the protocols they set in place to get workers back into the factory. If this is not met workers will have to take appropriate action because it's apparent the safety of workers and their families mean nothing to them."

The JNAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee has since joined with Safety Committees at several other plants throughout the country to form the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network.

FCA is also seeking to intimidate workers from keeping each other informed of the spread of the virus on social media. On August 10, FCA management sent a letter to salaried and hourly employees warning that workers could be disciplined and even terminated for social media posts that violated a long list of regulations including the exposure of "confidential company information"—in plain language, unsafe management practices.

However, this situation is hardly unique to FCA. From the beginning, management, at all the Detroit-based automakers, have suppressed the real extent of the pandemic in the auto plants. They have done so with the collusion of the UAW, which has been revealed by federal indictments and a lawsuit between General Motors and FCA to have accepted tens of millions in corporate bribes. Even COVID deaths are being covered up. The UAW and management failed to inform workers of the death of a young Ford contract worker at the Van Dyke transmission plant who succumbed to COVID last month.

A veteran Detroit area Ford worker said that cases were being covered up at their factory.

"I think the UAW and the company are telling people not to tell others if they have COVID.

"It doesn't matter if we are exposed, they don't care—they are not quarantining everyone who is exposed. At the end of the day it is a gain if some of us legacy workers die. There goes your pension, there goes your insurance, there goes your Social Security, there goes your Medicare. They know that. Our lives don't matter. There is no other reason they won't tell us. Look at the billions they are saving by workers dying. They are killing people to save money."

The attack on elementary safety measures demands an urgent response from autoworkers. Autoworkers must develop safety committees joining workers together at plants across North America, and link up their struggles with teachers, Amazon workers and other sections of the working class to demand that workers lives take precedence over corporate profits.

To join the Rank-and-File Safety Committee at your plant, or for assistance in establishing a Committee, contact the World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter *at* autoworkers@wsws.org.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site