

GM workers in Silao, Mexico, report eighth death from COVID-19, as corporation fires vulnerable workers

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31 August 2020

Workers at the General Motors assembly complex in Silao, Mexico, reported to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that Jose Manuel Montes Torres, a worker in the paint area, died on August 22 after contracting COVID-19.

The rank-and-file group Generating Movement, which has been compiling reports of deaths, infections and unsafe conditions during the pandemic, told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that Montes kept working at the plant until Sunday, August 16, “when they forced overtime.”

Generating Movement issued a statement last week declaring: “This [death] makes clear to us that the security protocol for a safe return to work facing the COVID-19 virus in this corporation is not working. There have been eight dead already.”

The group has recorded 30 COVID-19 cases in the plant but notes that this is an incomplete count, given that they have relied on reports from co-workers and family members amid an atmosphere of threats and intimidation by the corporation.

GM, the largest automaker in Mexico, and the local corporate-controlled union Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), have refused to provide workers with any information about COVID-19 cases in the plant.

This has been the norm at auto and auto part factories internationally. Across the United States, COVID-19 cases are being covered up by the automakers and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, and workers are being told they cannot share information, even about their own illness. Workers at several plants have responded by forming rank-and-file safety committees independent of the trade unions.

In Silao, co-workers who had contact with Montes

wrote that the corporation has refused to halt production, quarantine or test them. On August 27, one worker stated: “Today, they called us to the medical service due to the death of our co-worker, having been a positive COVID case. They only checked our temperature and filled a paper. I don’t know which questions it had since they simply said ‘No’ to everything. They only asked for my name and payroll number.”

To make matters worse, management has since announced last week that “water at sinks will only be available during snack times.” A worker commented: “They tell us to take care of ourselves and they do these things to save costs. This happened specifically in the paint area.”

Workers at the plant had also angrily told the *WSWS* that drinking fountains have been made unavailable during the pandemic, and there are only two short breaks to cool down during the 12-hour shifts.

On Friday, a worker at Silao with hypertension reported to the *Autoworker Newsletter* that GM fired him for missing work. Generating Movement explained that they have recorded at least three firings of vulnerable workers. The plant called vulnerable workers back on August 10, when there were already numerous reports of COVID-19 infections at the plant.

Over the weekend, the wife of a worker in the engine area who had tested positive for COVID-19 also reported to Generating Movement that her husband had caught the virus in the plant and that he was released from the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) hospital in very poor condition, forcing the family to provide further care.

Four days after Montes’s death, Francisco Garza,

president and CEO of GM Mexico, said to *Visión Automotriz*: “We have implemented health and safety protocols in our plants with the strictest guidelines of the World Health Organization and the IMSS, from the transportation of people, the entry to their workstations, eateries, shift changes... We were highly rated by the IMSS and it selected us as their model.”

GM’s professed concern for safety has been refuted by numerous reports from workers. Workers have described how they travel in buses packed “like sardines,” have shared videos showing how social distancing is not enforced during shift changes or inside the plant, and have stated that it’s “impossible” to keep a safe distance in the line.

Visits by health and labor authorities, moreover, are preceded by “instructions” from supervisors and union delegates, undoubtedly under the threat of reprisals. For instance, on August 6, workers wrote to the *Autoworker Newsletter*: “As you know, there were visits by the Labor and Social Welfare Secretariat since yesterday at the company, where the delegates from the Miguel Trujillo López trade union arrived to tell workers what they had to answer to the polls. Some of the auditors came from Mexico City.”

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General Motors had shut down production in Mexico on March 23, not to protect workers, but to prevent a wave of wildcat strikes in auto plants that had been spreading across Europe, the United States and Canada from reaching workers in the country. After starving workers on 55 percent of their salaries, General Motors gradually reopened its Mexican plants in late May after Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador declared the auto sector “essential.”

“We worked very closely with institutions like the Economy Secretariat in order to have the auto industry considered as essential,” explained GM Mexico head Garza.

Mexican auto production in July was 0.7 percent higher than last year, with *Expansión* writing recently, “The performance of the auto industry, after hitting bottom in April, has surprised analysts, distributors and auto executives.” The Mexican auto sector includes 980,000 workers directly and 3.6 million more workers indirectly.

While corporations and the government are covering

up the scale of the outbreaks and deaths, the revelations by workers signal that the toll of this murderous reopening, done at the behest of a tiny group of transnational corporations and their financiers, is massive. Mexico currently has the fourth highest COVID-19 death toll in the world, with nearly 65,000 confirmed fatalities, closely behind India, whose population is over 10 times greater.

The response by the ruling class and the government to the deadly outbreaks and denunciations by workers and their families has been to continue lying about the dire situation in an attempt to forestall any interruption to the process of generating profits for the capitalists.

The pandemic has exposed the populist demagoguery of the López Obrador government, the trade unions—whether the corrupt CTM or the so-called “independent” unions—and their apologists. All of these forces have shown an unwavering commitment to defending capitalism above the lives of workers and their families.

In order to oppose effectively the global drive by the capitalist ruling elites to force them to work in deadly workplaces, workers in Mexico must respond to the call of the WSWS to build rank-and-file safety committees independently of the trade unions and all other nationalist and pro-capitalist organizations. These committees, genuinely democratic workers organizations, must be developed as part of a powerful and globally coordinated counteroffensive of the working class to take the defense of their lives and conditions in their own hands against globalized finance capital.



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