

GM using office personnel to man assembly lines at Wentzville, Missouri plant as pandemic spreads

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Last week, the *Detroit Free Press* and several other sources reported that General Motors (GM) is bringing salaried workers onto the production assembly lines of its Wentzville Assembly Center in Missouri, located 40 miles outside of St. Louis.

Assembly workers have called off shifts due to health and safety concerns over the spread of COVID-19, which has led to many choosing to stay home rather than risk exposure in the crowded plant, which employs roughly 1,250 workers per shift. Workers at the plant build Chevy Colorado and GMC Canyon mid-size pickup trucks, the Chevy Express and GMC Savana full-size vans.

The Wentzville Assembly Center is located in St. Charles County, Missouri, an area that has seen an alarming increase in its COVID-19 test positivity rate and prevalence of positive cases. The rise followed the premature resumption of economic activity in June after several weeks of lockdowns and business closures, which, while limited, aided in slowing the transmission of the virus.

According to the county's Department of Public Health web page, its current 14-day test positivity rate stands at 9.5 percent and its latest 14-day average prevalence per 1,000 of population stands at 2.86. Over the past 14 days, confirmed cases have increased by 15 percent, and the number of quarantined persons has increased by 1 percent.

The corporation clearly views the legitimate health and safety concerns of assembly line workers as an irritating hindrance to its relentless drive to maintain profit levels in a market where its sales have fallen on average by 24 percent year-over-year, roughly in line with the rest of the global auto industry, according to the company's 2020 second-quarter sales report.

In announcing its shifting of some salaried workers to production lines at Wentzville, GM spokesman Jim Cain told the *Free Press* last Tuesday, "The team on the ground in Wentzville is trying to navigate a very difficult situation to keep the plant operating, while accommodating employees who are not showing up to work due to concern of Covid."

Responding to the demands of its wealthiest investors, in July GM backtracked on its earlier decision to cut the third shift at the plant and decided to keep the lines running to pump out

profits as COVID-19 cases were on the rise. It also transferred workers to Wentzville from the GM Spring Hill, Tennessee plant, where a shift was being cut, and from the Detroit-Hamtramck GM facility, in addition to hiring in more temporary workers.

The United Auto Workers union and all of the Detroit-based auto manufacturers are deliberately concealing the true number of positive COVID-19 cases at the plants from rank-and-file workers, exacerbating the already unsafe conditions. Workers are packed together on full shifts without adequate or comfortable personal protective equipment (PPE), working overtime in poorly ventilated and improperly cleaned facilities, where they do not know who has and has not either contracted the virus or come into close contact with someone who has.

Furthermore, there is virtually no effective contact tracing or testing of workers being done at any of the facilities, although the corporation has ample financial resources and influence to implement such measures. Instead, management is relying on highly unreliable screening measures such as daily temperature checks and symptom questionnaires for workers as they enter the plant, measures that the UAW had rubber-stamped as adequate when North American auto production restarted in May.

In March, wildcat strike action in the US, Canada, Mexico and Europe against unsafe working conditions forced the temporary shutdown of auto plants.

The salaried office workers being brought to the assembly lines are supposedly "volunteers," according to Cain, and mainly work "within a product capacity," meaning that they have been inside plants and are familiar with the production process. "They could be manufacturing engineers, so they're familiar with what happens inside the four walls of an assembly plant. They're not coming in cold, but they do have to learn a new job and quality," he explained to the *Free Press*. He also cited the measure as a way to get around the time it takes to onboard and train over 200 temporary positions it has been hiring since July.

Concerns certainly exist over whether or not the salaried engineers, or other workers, will be trained properly for the job.

The corporation has already shown its willingness to sacrifice the health of as many workers as it takes to maintain levels of profit desired by shareholders. Assembly workers faced unsafe working conditions in the plant pre-pandemic, due in part to the UAW's collaboration through joint labor-management "environmental and health" committees, in reality entirely subservient to management.

When Honda's manufacturing plant in Marysville, Ohio, a nonunion shop, began using office workers on the assembly line at the beginning of August, UAW spokesman Brian Rothenberg claimed that office workers at the Detroit auto companies would never be pulled to work on the factory floor, a claim that has now been proven to have no merit. In response to the development in Wentzville, Rothenberg merely stated, "We strenuously object to GM doing this," but proposed no action whatsoever.

Rothenberg stated at the time of the Honda Marysville announcement, "First, we have unionized temp workers to fill in," referring to the reserve army of superexploited temporary and supplemental workers, who are paid below full-time wages and receive few benefits. This low-wage category was enshrined in contracts signed by the UAW in the wake of the 2009 bankruptcy and restructuring of the US auto industry and maintained in subsequent concessions contracts.

He also pointed to the reserves of unemployed autoworkers that the UAW would help force back into unsafe conditions through economic blackmail. "And if there's not enough of those, other people who are laid off from the nearby area, and then a larger area, and then a larger area, and call them back to work."

In response to the company's decision, a veteran worker at the plant told the WWS: "They are so stingy [bringing in salaried workers], when we have permanent people on layoff at two plants. Maybe they are waiting it out so they don't have to transfer higher paid guys in and can auto-convert the temps that are up for conversion in October at a lower rate."

The worker denounced the UAW, pointing to the sellout of last year's GM strike and the ongoing corruption scandal. "I'm tired of them getting fat and not giving anything back, like our big \$250-a-week strike pay, while they pay legal fees for our union heads that stole all of our money."

The UAW's response to the company's latest actions to endanger workers' lives in the name of profits has been completely toothless. Cain stated to the press that he has not seen the supposed grievances. According to the *Free Press*, the UAW Local 2250 has refused to call for any strike or work stoppage, and has only issued a warning and claims to have filed grievances to GM based on Paragraph 215 of the 2019 concessions contract, pushed through after the betrayal and isolation of the longest GM strike in well over four decades.

It states, "Supervisory employees shall not be permitted to perform work on any hourly-rated job except in the following types of situations: (1) in emergencies arising out of unforeseen

circumstances which call for immediate action to avoid interruption of operations; (2) in the instruction or training of employees, including demonstrating the proper method to accomplish the task assigned."

The UAW seeks to divide workers in the plant, whether they are assembly line workers, white-collar workers or cleaning staff. It knows that its perfunctory warning has no teeth, since the contract was written with the interests of GM at heart, and that according to the profit interests of the company, the pandemic counts as an emergency "arising out of unforeseen circumstances."

Workers know that the union is completely incapable of and unwilling to defend the health and safety of any workers on the production lines. The UAW has been exposed many times over as a bribed tool of the corporation, as demonstrated by the ongoing allegations contained in a recent GM court filing of payoffs being funneled by Fiat Chrysler officials to union executives through offshore bank accounts.

The real emergency is that the lives and health of workers at all levels of production are being sacrificed for the profit interests of a wealthy few. There are ample resources to suspend production and pay workers in full, in a nonessential industry such as auto manufacturing, until the pandemic is under control.

For workers to expropriate the wealth needed to fulfill their demands as a class against the corporations and its cronies in the union, they must unite across all areas of the plant independently of the UAW. Workers at Wentzville must look to the examples of autoworkers across the US Midwest and Mexico as well as teachers who are forming rank-and-file safety committees to unite the working class to stop the spread of COVID-19 and save lives.

If you work at GM Wentzville Assembly and you want to learn more about how you can organize a committee at your plant to link up with other autoworkers, teachers, logistics workers, meatpackers and others throughout North America and the world, contact us today. The WWS *Autoworker Newsletter* and Socialist Equality Party are doing everything that it can to support workers in this life-or-death struggle.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact