

Wildcat strike over COVID-19 at Lear auto parts plant in Indiana

Marcus Day
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Auto parts workers stopped production and refused to work for several hours Friday night at Lear Corporation's automotive seating plant in Hammond, Indiana after learning about potential COVID-19 cases in the facility.

Lear employs roughly 875 workers at its northwest Indiana plant, which supplies seats for the Ford Explorer and other models built at the nearby Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP). Because CAP runs on the "just-in-time" supply system, Ford was forced to idle CAP and send workers home early Saturday morning after running out of seats from Lear within hours of the work stoppage.

Ryan, a worker at the Lear plant, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the work stoppage. His name has been changed to protect him from retaliation.

Ryan was on one of the lines where the job action took place, saying, "There was a situation at Lear Friday night that shut us down for two hours and resulted in management and the union being called in."

He said that workers stopped a line on the "sub-assembly" side of the plant—where wages start at the poverty level of just \$14.10 an hour—after learning that one of their coworkers had been experiencing COVID-19 symptoms for several days, but had not been prevented from coming to work by the temperature check or other screening measures.

"Everyone refused to work, we shut down for two hours, until management was called in and made us return to work."

United Auto Workers officials from Local 2335 defended management and also insisted that workers

restart the line, Ryan said. "The union president Hanif Hassan basically sided with management."

In addition to the wildcat action on the sub-assembly side of the plant, which involved nearly 30 workers, a larger group of workers on the main assembly side (referred to as Just-in-Time, JIT) also stopped work over concerns that two workers had COVID-19 symptoms.

"There was the entire JIT first row," Ryan continued. "They stopped with us and I'd say close to 100 to 150 [were involved]."

The stoppage at Lear is only the latest in a series of wildcat strikes in the global auto industry over the course of the year against the reckless drive by the companies to maintain full production during the pandemic. A wave of wildcat strikes in mid-March, which overwhelmed desperate attempts by the UAW to maintain production, successfully shut down the industry across North America for two months.

This week's stoppage at Lear was at least the second at the plant since the onset of the pandemic. On March 17, a group of 30 to 40 workers walked off after learning that a manager had tested positive. That action was itself part of a wave of wildcat strikes that erupted across North America, which forced the shutdown of the auto industry.

In the aftermath of wildcat strikes in March and June, workers at auto plants in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Chicago began to organize rank-and-file safety committees independently of the unions in order to fight for safe and humane working conditions. To halt the spread of the virus in the plant and ensure their needs take precedence over corporate profits, workers at Lear should organize their own rank-and-file safety committee, linking up with the committee at CAP and other auto plants, and the network of safety committees

being organized by teachers throughout the US to stop the deadly reopening of schools.

As with the other major auto companies, Lear routinely violates its own inadequate safety measures, which have been progressively abandoned week by week. Lear sent a mass text to employees Saturday stating that six new positive cases had been confirmed, without disclosing where they were located in the plant or the total confirmed cases to date.

Workers at Lear, as at other parts suppliers, have been subjected to relentless speedup and forced overtime, as the companies seek to make up lost inventory and squeeze out whatever they can from a relative uptick in demand. Workers on B shift at the plant have been scheduled 14 consecutive Saturday overtime shifts in a row, Ryan said.

Ryan spoke bitterly about management and the UAW's blatant indifference to workers' health and safety: "Last night was an opportunity for the company to show that they actually care about us, but instead they essentially slapped us in the face and showed us that they really don't care about us workers, and the union sided with management.

"This company would rather put our lives in jeopardy just to continue to make a profit. But at the end of the day, we the production workers are the reason that Lear, Ford and all of the other companies are making a profit. Without us they don't make their money."

Word of the latest job action at Lear spread quickly among Ford workers at CAP via social media Friday night as production at that plant ground to a halt. A veteran worker at CAP applauded Lear workers, telling the WSWs that workers at "Lear, Ford, GM and other people at other companies that feel their safety or life is in danger should do what they feel is right for them without fear of losing their jobs. The UAW union is just as bad as the company. I would also walk out if I thought it was necessary to protect myself. This virus is the real thing."

Lear, headquartered in Southfield, Michigan, is the world's ninth-largest auto supplier, according to *Automotive News*, reporting nearly \$20 billion in sales in 2019, and employing over 160,000 workers across 39 countries. While the company presented itself as an industry leader in safety measures by publicizing a "Safe Work Playbook" prior to the reopening, its overriding concern for profit and disregard for

workers' lives has been demonstrated throughout its operations. In Mexico, at least 18 workers died from COVID-19 at the company's Rio Bravo plant in Ciudad Juárez this year.

A veteran worker at the Lear Hammond plant spoke to the WSWs. "Every day is a risk. I'm scared to death in there every day. I'm so upset with the whole agenda. The UAW president had no business sending us back to work. If they were going to send us back to work, they should've had the company test everybody."

As at other plants, workers learned about new COVID-19 cases primarily through each other on Facebook, which the company has sought to discourage. She said one worker posted about his own positive test in order to warn his coworkers. "He went live on Facebook to tell us. The company never told us to quarantine. They never told us anything. HR told him not to post about it. Why was it kept quiet? Why have I found out on social media that I may need to quarantine?"

"In the middle of the pandemic, they had a job fair. They hired at least 200-300 people without giving them a COVID-19 test. I think once they get caught up [on production] they're going to let them go."

She denounced the promises the company made in order to convince workers to return, which were broken, one after another. "They said we weren't going to work overtime, not true. They told us we weren't going to cross paths. They let us off at the same time, no room to social distance. We're crossing paths with whatever shift is coming after us.

"A lot of these big companies sold us a pipe dream, 'oh we're going to do this, we're going to do that.' But the Big Three have failed us. Tremendously. All these big businesses, all they care about is the money."

The worker praised workers for organizing rank-and-file committees at plants in Detroit and elsewhere, saying, "I'm so proud of them." She added, "We don't need a union. They gave the power to the company. It's crazy to sacrifice the blood of your workers. They just don't care."



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