

“Lear is hell”: Workers speak out as COVID-19 outbreak at Indiana auto parts plant worsens

Marcus Day
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Work at Lear's Hammond plant? Contact us today to share a tip or for assistance in organizing a rank-and-file safety committee.

Anger is growing among workers over the worsening COVID-19 outbreak at the Lear automotive seating plant in Hammond, Indiana. The facility employs nearly 900 workers and is located just across the state border from Chicago, Illinois.

Nearly two weeks ago, a wildcat strike broke out at the factory for several hours. Workers were gravely concerned that they were being exposed to the coronavirus in the plant. The work stoppage quickly led to production disruptions at the nearby Ford Chicago Assembly Plant, which is supplied by Lear and produces the Explorer SUV. Both Lear management and the United Auto Workers union rushed to the idled lines to demand workers return to their jobs.

The wildcat action was at least the second at the plant since the outbreak of the pandemic. In March, dozens of workers walked out after learning that a supervisor had tested positive, part of a wave of wildcat strikes that forced the shutdown of the auto industry.

Management and the UAW have refused to provide up-to-date figures on the spread of COVID-19 at the plant. Workers at Lear have taken to Facebook to self-report when they receive positive test results to warn those they were in contact with. At least five have reported that they tested positive over the last week and a half, workers say, in addition to the six positive cases the company admitted to on Saturday, September 12.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* recently spoke with two workers at the plant who had tested positive for COVID-19. Their names have been withheld and certain details have been changed in order to protect them from retaliation.

“It’s off and on, I have good days and bad days,” one worker said about his symptoms. “The doctor just says to take Tylenol for the fever.”

Asked if they knew how many total cases had emerged at the plant, they replied, “Lear hasn’t told us how many. It’s mostly people coming out on our Facebook group.

“Lear is hell. It’s not a good place to work anymore,” they continued. They reported that management had recently threatened them with the loss of the company’s contract with Ford if production disruptions continue, a potential death sentence for the Lear plant and hundreds of workers jobs.

Another worker who had tested positive said, “All of us who came down with symptoms lost our sense of taste and smell and felt extremely worn out and tired. Some developed a cough, sore throat, and a runny nose. It all started with a runny nose. Then I lost my sense of smell and then taste, and by the next morning I was so lethargic I couldn’t stay awake. I’m still extremely tired and have yet to regain my sense of smell and taste.”

Earlier in the year one worker at the plant had succumbed to COVID-19, they reported, one of dozens throughout the industry before autoworkers forced the corporations and the UAW to shut down production in mid-March. At least 13 have died at Lear’s plant in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. “We lost a coworker to COVID back in April or May from the JIT side [Just-in-Time] while we were shut down for two months. Many became very ill on Friday, September 11, after the company hid the fact that there were known positive cases.”

Workers at the Hammond plant are split into unequal tiers, between JIT (final assembly) and “sub-assembly,” a widely hated setup first negotiated by the UAW behind workers’ backs in 2014. Workers in the subassembly part of the plant are paid less, starting at the poverty wages of

just \$14.10 an hour. Lear workers repeatedly sought to reject this tier system in 2018, voting down two UAW-backed contract proposals by large margins, before the UAW eventually rammed the deal through with a highly dubious “50.8 percent” vote margin and under conditions of threats of job losses.

Two weeks ago, workers on both the final assembly and subassembly sides of the plant rebelled against the coverup of COVID-19 cases, confronting the combined opposition of both management and the UAW. “The JIT side is where the entire uproar started out that Friday night, because we found out we had two positive cases that were at work the whole week prior to them getting their positive results. Then we saw the Sub [subassembly] side doing the same thing on the other side of the plant.”

Workers “stopped production and got into a huge screaming match with management and our union president over the unsafe conditions,” the worker continued. “They told us to clean our areas and get back to work.

“Our union president [UAW Local 2335 President Hanif Hasan] is not for us at all. He is all for management,” they said. “When our president walked in, he completely ignored us union members and walked right past us without saying a word and went straight to management.”

The company subsequently sought to placate workers with exaggerated claims of deep cleaning, the worker said. “They claimed they did a thorough cleaning while we were on our 20-minute break, but the two people doing the cleaning called them out on their lies and told us all that they only cleaned the small area where the positive case was working at. That is when we had to clean our own areas thoroughly and get back to work.

“Our HR department is absolutely horrible and rude to us. Most days B shift never gets to see them because they leave as we are getting there or before,” they continued. The company has also imposed relentless overtime for months on end. “They’ve worked us six days a week for over a year now on B shift. We never get time with our families; we can’t ever schedule plans because they throw up Saturdays at the last minute most of the time.

“Everything is always a secret in that place. Our jobs are constantly being threatened. On Friday we were told that if we clocked out then, we would no longer have a job come the following Tuesday. We’ve been lied to so much and promised so many things that they have never followed through with. They think they can bribe us with food, and everything will be just fine!”

To combat the company-UAW gangup, which is endangering the lives of workers and those of their families, Lear workers should follow the lead of autoworkers at FCA, Ford and Faurecia plants and organize a rank-and-file safety committee, independent of the union. Such a committee is necessary in order to break through the conspiracy of silence over the spread of COVID-19 and to assert workers’ control over safety and workplace conditions.

A member of the Chicago Ford Rank-and-File Safety Committee denounced the treatment of Lear workers. “It’s really horrible. Ford’s basically doing the same thing. I heard how they only brought in sanitation after the fact. It’s something you put in place ahead of an outbreak. It’s more proof to me that they’re not really concerned about their well-being.”

He was furious when heard that the company had been telling workers that the contract with Ford would be in jeopardy if more production disruptions occurred. “With Ford intimidating Lear, Lear intimidating their employees, it just pisses me off so much. You want to intimidate people just to keep production going? It’s a life-or-death situation!

“It’s the ruling class that has got the big property and the incomes, and they’re getting all the tax breaks. They’re trying to scare us back to work, but it’s our lives on the line. They’re only concerned about their own interests. Obviously, they don’t care about humanity, or the survival of humanity. It’s like we’re the casualties of war. But we never volunteered into this war.”

Addressing himself to workers at Lear, he said, “I would ask them to let down their fear, be courageous, be bold. What’s affected them is affecting us. With what management is doing, it’s only right for us to band together and have a rank-and-file safety committee, so we don’t have outbreaks or cases like this that are very dangerous to us. We’re willing to work with them and stand with them. If we don’t take a stand here and now, what will our children have to face?”



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