

GM victimizes Mexican worker for quarantining after catching COVID-19

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21 October 2020

General Motors has fired a veteran autoworker at its Silao, Mexico complex for quarantining himself after contracting COVID-19, an action GM saw as a challenge to its efforts to cover up outbreaks at the factory and continue production.

Sergio Contreras Ortega was a team leader in the paint area with 26 years of experience at GM. He is also a member of Generating Movement, a rank-and-file group at the GM Complex in Silao that has sought to organize workers in opposition to the corporate-controlled Miguel Trujillo union of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). Several workers in the group were fired last year for supporting American workers by refusing to work overtime during the GM strike in the US.

“They fired me after contracting COVID,” Contreras told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. His symptoms appeared three days after Gilberto M., a co-worker in his team, died from COVID-19, on July 9.

Management told him to go to the company’s medical department, which then told him to go to the government-run Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS). “My family decided not to send me to IMSS,” he said, adding, “The situation was such that if I went there, I would not come out alive. So, I went to a private doctor, who confirmed that I had the virus”.

In July, the public hospitals assigned to treat coronavirus cases in the state of Guanajuato, where Silao is located, reached full capacity and other hospitals forced to take in infected patients were reporting lack of personnel. That month, authorities reported that about 80 percent of COVID-19 fatalities across Mexico never received any intensive care with ventilators.

The country has so far confirmed 87,000 coronavirus deaths, the fourth highest in the world, but a recent

Economist report estimated over 173,000 excess deaths between April and August.

Nonetheless, Contreras still had to go to IMSS to request a leave for work. At the hospital, he says, “they never checked me, simply looked at me, concluded I was fine and told me to go back to work. They didn’t give me the leave.” Instead, Contreras chose to use his vacation days, a request initially rejected by GM.

Four days after Contreras left the plant, another team member fell ill, which compelled the medical department to announce that the entire team would get “tested.” Workers, however, describe that they were simply asked if they had a headache, diarrhea or fever, with the doctor marking “No” on a sheet of paper and replying, “You don’t have COVID. Return to work.”

Contreras continued, “They have never tested anyone for COVID in that plant, and there have already been nine deaths and many others have been fired for getting infected.”

On August 6, the day he was scheduled to return, Contreras was still ill. Management and union officials said they could not help him without “a leave” from IMSS. Dora Luz, a lawyer at GM Human Resources, sought to reassure him, however. “I have an audio where she says that all those days that I was sick were going to be counted as unpaid leave and not misses,” he says.

Contreras was compelled to return to work, but his symptoms continued, so he returned to the private doctor, who ordered him to rest. After several weeks, his team coordinator Francisco Castillo visited him. Contreras continued, “Castillo told me, ‘You can return to work when you are fine. All those days you missed are being interpreted as an unpaid leave.’”

On September 28, he returned to the plant, where the substitute team leader ordered Contreras to go to

Human Resources. There, in a little room, he was met by Dora Luz, who told him to leave his phone outside. “You haven’t been coming to work,” complained Luz, before seeking to strongarm Contreras into signing a document acknowledging that all those days were an “unjustified absence.” Contreras refused, arguing that the document would be used to demote him and ultimately lay him off under company terms.

A union official in the room became angry and aggressive against Contreras, who demanded that the official leave the room. Another manager, Julio Arce, and other officials tried several times to get Contreras to sign throughout the day. Before the end of his shift, Contreras was asked to go straight to management the following day.

He decided not to go to work to avoid a confrontation and instead went to the labor court to file a lawsuit against GM. “According to safety and security norms, when a person gets infected, the entire area should be quarantined for a month,” Contreras said.

“After 26 years of work and turning 54 years old, I was looking forward to my retirement, but now I can’t even get a job because I have been blacklisted. That illusion of a retirement is gone.”

Israel Cervantes, the spokesperson of the Generating Movement, and other workers in the group who were subject to unjustified firings have also faced obstacles in finding work.

At the same time, the workers’ efforts to oust the corrupt CTM union have been met with government-sanctioned “elections,” which workers have described as a “farce.” This included the pushing through of a union recognition vote in February and the hand-picking of shop stewards this month. “They simply published the manipulated results,” explains Contreras.

The government of Andres Manuel López Obrador, whose labor “reform” last year promised democratic elections in every union, has sought a closer alliance with the CTM and turned a blind eye to its continued fraud, intimidation and corruption.

This is the result of the pro-capitalist and nationalist character of the government, the CTM and the so-called “independent” unions aligned with López Obrador. Their fundamental concern is to attract foreign investments so that the Mexican elite, including the union bureaucracies, can become richer by administrating that capital.

They offer investors a “Mexico package” that today places front and center the continuation of production during the pandemic at all costs, while sweeping the bodies of tens of thousands of workers under the rug and axing anyone like Sergio Contreras, who dares to challenge management to follow basic health recommendations.

“GM Silao cares more about production than workers,” concluded Contreras. “We have to unite with co-workers in Canada, the US and other countries because the government is clearly in favor of the corporations, not saying a single thing about what is going on.”

The globalized drive of transnational corporations like General Motors to search out the country and region where governments and unions will enforce capitalist discipline most viciously, and pit workers against each other, can only be confronted by a movement of workers internationally to abolish capitalist exploitation itself.

An international network of rank-and-file committees must be built, independently of all capitalist politicians like López Obrador, the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists, all of whom are proven defenders of the “right” of capitalists to profit at the expense of the social rights and lives of the working class.



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