

“The plant is a powder keg”

Fiat Chrysler covered up dozens of infections and two deaths at Jefferson North Assembly Plant

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The World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter calls on workers at Jefferson North and throughout the auto industry to organize rank-and-file safety committees to protect worker health and save lives. For assistance in forming these committees, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.

Fiat Chrysler management has covered up dozens of infections and at least two deaths at its Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, according to a leaked report.

According to a report posted on Facebook, 59 workers at the plant have been infected with the virus since May and two have died. None of these infections were previously made public by either management or the United Auto Workers union, as there is no public tally of infections or alerts sent to workers on the spread of the disease.

Among workers, anger is at the boiling point. Hundreds of workers have taken sick leave rather than report to work under conditions where COVID-19 is running rampant in workplaces and the community.

As reported in the *World Socialist Web Site* by a member of the JNAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee, last month FCA eliminated the extra five minutes added to break time when the auto plants reopened in May to permit cleaning. Now, cleaning in the plant is haphazard or non-existent, while the screening procedures for workers entering the plant are careless at best.

The auto companies are essentially carrying out the policy of “herd immunity,” letting the virus spread unchecked through the community to infect as many as possible. This is the policy of not only the Trump administration, but Democrats such as Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and presidential candidate

Joe Biden.

“It is bad enough they do everything half-ass [screening] people coming into the plant,” said one veteran worker. “They have taken away the breaks; the bathrooms are nasty. They brought us back to work to just get sick. Over the next 10 weeks they are expecting a high wave” of new infections.

“A lot of people are complaining. One guy made a post on Facebook page, asking ‘what is protecting us from COVID now?’ It went from 4 questions to 3 questions [on the screening questionnaire]. He said you are barely getting checked. He said they took his post down, but he put it back up.

“We had a gentleman named T. who died and another young man who died. No one knows what T. died from. But he seemed to be a very healthy man. Nothing seemed wrong with him. I think he was age 48-49. He was a really nice man, quiet, he didn’t bother anybody.”

Another worker said: “There are 59 confirmed cases at the plant. A committeeman posted the numbers on his Facebook page. I am quite sure we have some more cases but they are not saying anything.”

“The plant is a powder keg. It is about to explode. People are not being represented. They are trying to get people fired here for even making noises about the COVID. The [UAW] are working with management.

“We had a woman on our team out for suspected COVID, but they did not isolate her team. She was out for a couple of days. I thought the procedure was: if someone is being tested for COVID, they are supposed to notify the team. They never notified them.”

The worker described the role of the UAW in ending the job action by JNAP workers in June over the cover-up of

COVID infections in the plant. “The union is working against us. They force us to be here so they can steal from us some more. We stood on the line [last June] refusing to work for two days. The union refused to represent us. The union told the company to fire us. That’s what forced us back to work. Other than that, we would have still been standing on the line.

“They are trying to act as if this is a normal thing now; it is part of life. It's not! Who heard of people working in a mask for 10 hours? You can't breathe. You have people here who can't wear the mask; so they put them out of the plant. They don't have a use for them. If you have an asthma attack, the health clinic is not even open. You have 1,000 people who are still out, because they are afraid to come up in here. They would like to force them back in.

“Tell me that is not slavery ... You are making people come to work so they have no life. All they do is work and sleep.”

Many workers at the plant had read the article posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* about the 12-hour, 7-day schedule imposed on skilled trades workers at FCA's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), the worker said. “We need some help—you guys got to put it out there for us. People read your stuff. They believe what you guys are reporting.”

The Jefferson North Rank-and-File Safety Committee issued the following statement in response to the growing worker protests.

“The number of COVID cases is on the rise in Michigan and FCA has removed the majority of its own safety precautions. There are many people with underlying health issues who can't afford to get sick. We should be able to come to work and not fear catching the virus. We have families, but FCA doesn't care. They just want us to tow the line.

“FCA has abandoned most of the safety precautions they implemented for employees' 'safety.' With employees being forced to work in these conditions, how do we expect the company to care about our lives and safety when they have shown us they could care less?

“FCA did just enough to give workers false hope at first, but now all but a small number of precautions have been removed. FCA and the UAW have been very deceptive about the number of COVID cases. They have gone so far as to warn and threaten people who contracted the virus not to tell co-workers.

“The UAW has abandoned us, the very workers they claim to protect. The UAW and management are in bed

together, and so as long as they are joined at the hip, the employees will always be the sacrificial lambs.

“We must organize ourselves. The UAW does not fight for us. The Jefferson North Rank-and-File Committee demands:

- Workers must be immediately notified of any cases of COVID-19 and what areas were affected. This information cannot be kept secret from workers.

- When there's a case confirmed, the factory should be closed for 24 hours for deep cleaning, not just the affected area, but the whole plant. Preventive maintenance is needed to ensure a safe and comfortable working environment.

- Social distancing must be implemented when entering and leaving the plant and during bathroom, lunch and other break times.

- The line must be stopped for 10 minutes every hour to enable workers to take off their masks, rest and cool off.

- Workers must have regular, universal testing. Temperature checks and self-reporting symptoms are not enough.

- If conditions are not safe, workers have the right to refuse to work without threat of retaliation by management and the union.



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