

Autoworkers demand to know: How extensive is the outbreak at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant?

The Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee
4 November 2020

The Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands that Fiat Chrysler and the United Auto Workers union make public all information, including dates and locations of cases, on the spread of the virus in the plant. We urge all of our brothers and sisters to be prepared to halt production if necessary so the plant can be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected to protect our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

We have independently confirmed that there were at least two separate outbreaks in the plant over the past week, in departments located on opposite sides of the plant. This suggests that a much larger outbreak may be underway. At the same time management continues to bring in new hires on a day-to-day basis and send them to different areas of the plant, creating the conditions not only for the infection of these unsuspecting workers but the further spread of the contagion inside the plant and into the broader community.

A short distance from our plant, the virus also continues to spread at Sterling Stamping Plant. The UAW has admitted at least five new cases there in little more than one week. The UAW has done nothing except reassure workers that “all safety protocols have been followed.” Workers at the Stamping plant and at SHAP know this is a lie.

The situation now is critical. Last week, the United States surpassed more than 100,000 cases a day for the first time and the hospitalizations and deaths are on the rise across the US. The number of deaths has surpassed a staggering 235,000 people, with public health experts predicting the death toll could pass 400,000 by February 1. The new center of the pandemic in the country is the Midwest, where the auto industry is concentrated.

Schools are reopening, businesses are open and running, and with the lifting of government lockdown measures is

allowing the deadly contagion to spread out of control. The virus is most heavily concentrated in the working-class communities and is spreading in large factories and workplaces, schools and universities. Without necessary measures such as social distancing, regular testing, contact tracing and proper personal protective equipment, the virus will continue to grow and grow with no end in sight.

The automakers and the UAW have deliberately covered up the extent of the virus in the plants. That is why workers and the public do not know what the real situation in the auto industry is. However, last week, a leaked document at FCA’s Jefferson North Assembly Plant showed 59 total infections and two deaths, none of which had previously been made public.

Workers who have been exposed are left to jump through hoops by management and the UAW, pressuring them to make uninformed or rash decisions that place themselves and their coworkers at risk. We are left to navigate phone trees for hours or wait for calls, which never come from HR. The process is geared to get us to do one of three things: first, give up and go to work having been exposed; second, no call no show, leaving us with one foot out of the door; or third, unknowingly violate company policy with respect to the virus, opening us up to being fired.

Throughout the auto industry, management has used its confusing quarantine protocols to victimize workers known for their opposition to the company. Among the most notorious cases was the firing of James Grady at the Faurecia Gladstone plant in Indiana, and Sergio Contreras Ortega at GM’s plant in Silao, Mexico.

Last week, FCA announced that it made \$1.4 billion in profits in the third quarter. Ford announced over \$2 billion in profits, and the entire North American industry

produced *the same number of cars* as they did during the same period last year, under conditions of a pandemic which killed more than 80,000 over the summer. The FCA bosses made this money, in spite of the pandemic, through brutal forced overtime and by keeping workers on the job after having been exposed. At our plant, they are forcing skilled tradespeople to work 12-hour shifts for seven days a week. Conditions are so bad that the auto companies are struggling to compete with Amazon for new hires.

The UAW, just like management, tells us nothing. We cannot even get information from them on the steps we need to follow once we have been exposed. This shows that the only role the UAW plays is to keep us on the job. Frequently, they pressure us to keep working by claiming that we were “only” around someone who was infected for ten or twelve minutes rather than 15. When a worker raises a problem with safety, UAW stewards frequently don’t even show up until after the FCA supervisor. The union steward is never on the scene first. And when an infection is confirmed, they allow production to continue without cleaning. In some situations, it is not uncommon to see supervisors on the line just to keep production going.

Brothers and sisters, to fight this, we must rely on ourselves and come together and formulate our own demands. It was only the action of rank-and-file workers, when we stopped production at SHAP, JNAP, Toledo and other FCA plants in March, that led to the closure of the auto industry and most of the economy around the country, saving tens of thousands of lives. This showed that we are more powerful than the UAW and management when we come together to act independently of the union.

The SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee proposes that workers throughout the plant discuss a program of action. We call on workers to fight for the following demands:

1. Management must make public all cases in the plant, including time and location of each exposure. There must be a nationwide database of all cases in the entire auto industry, which is updated on a daily basis. When management rejects this, hiding behind HIPAA privacy laws to say that they cannot release this information, they are lying. HIPAA laws contain an explicit exception for the tracking of infectious diseases.

2. Regular, universal testing for all employees with rapid results. At a bare minimum, we must all be tested at least once per week. We cannot wait until we are already

quarantining to get tested.

3. We want a serious screening process. At present, screeners regularly wave people through, endangering everyone.

4. Workers must be allowed to quarantine easily and without harassment, with full pay and no loss of sick leave. We must not be forced to choose between affording living expenses and our health.

5. Regular professional cleaning of workstations, not just by ourselves with spray bottles. When a confirmed case occurs on the line, that area should be shut down for intensive cleaning before restarting. If more than one case is found, the factory should be shut down for 48 hours for a full disinfecting. Workers must be fully paid for any shutdowns.

6. Forced overtime and the Alternative Work Schedule must be brought to an end, and the eight-hour day reinstated. In upholding the eight-hour day, we are not only upholding one of the most important achievements of the working class but supporting an elementary safety measure. The longer we are in the plants, the more likely we are to be exposed.

We are writing this statement in the midst of a presidential election in which Trump has threatened to reject any outcome that goes against him. While we don’t know what the final outcome will be, one thing is certain: the danger of dictatorship goes hand-in-hand with the policy of both parties to herd workers into the plants to produce corporate profit no matter how many workers lose their lives.

Our committee rejects this. But it is up to workers to defend our lives and enforce health and safety in the plant. At the same time, FCA, Ford, GM and auto parts workers have to unite with teachers, grocery workers, Amazon workers and other workers in a common fight to defend the rights of the working class.

If you agree with this statement, take up the fight! Join the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee today. Contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact