

Coronavirus spreading out of control at Sterling Stamping Plant: A case study of infections in the US auto industry

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

An ongoing outbreak of coronavirus at Fiat Chrysler's Sterling Stamping Plant (SSP) in suburban Detroit suggests that a wide-ranging cover-up of new infections is underway in the auto industry as a whole. Sterling Stamping, located adjacent to the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit, is the largest stamping plant in the world, with more than 2,100 workers. It produces car body parts for the lucrative Jeep Cherokee and Grand Cherokee, Ram pickup trucks and Chrysler minivans.

Figures on the spread of the disease at SSP, which are being collected and published here for the first time by the Sterling Heights Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, come amidst a growing body of data pointing to the leading role of factories and workplaces in spreading the virus outward into broader communities. On November 6, Illinois Democratic Governor JB Pritzker announced that 52 workplaces have been the leading source of outbreaks in the state since the beginning of July. According to Illinois health figures, nearly one in three "outbreaks," defined as a cluster of five or more cases, occurred in factories and workplaces.

The heavily industrialized Midwest, where much of the auto industry is concentrated, is currently the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States. But in spite of the significant public health risk posed by the operating of factories, the auto industry and the United Auto Workers union are engaged in a massive cover-up of the real spread of the virus in the factories.

Since the restart of production in May after a two-month shutdown forced by wildcat strikes, the auto industry has largely abandoned any pretense of regular reporting on the spread of the virus. However, by mid-May at least 22 workers at Fiat Chrysler alone had perished from the disease. The last press release on FCA's "Covid Response Newsroom" on its website dates to June 29.

For most plants, even piecemeal figures of any sort are simply unavailable. But a leaked management report from FCA's Jefferson North Assembly Plant, which showed a total of 59 cases and two deaths, indicates that management and the UAW are tracking the spread in secret and in great detail.

Sterling Stamping is one of the few plants where figures are being announced to anyone. However, new cases are not being made public. Instead, UAW Local 1264 is quietly notifying workers through perfunctory internal text messages, including the location within the plant and the last date that the infected person worked at the plant. It is not clear whether workers are being notified when they have been exposed to infected co-workers.

At present, there have been 26 total confirmed cases at the plant since the start of the pandemic. This represents a sharp increase from nine total cases at the start of October, a 189 percent increase in less than six weeks.

However, infections are accelerating even faster than this figure suggests. Ten days into November, there have been almost as many infections in the plant, eight, as the nine infections for the entire month of October.

Infections have occurred in virtually every area of the plant, but the highest concentrations are in the press room and skilled trades, with seven and five confirmed cases respectively. Given that skilled trades, including electricians, pipefitters and millwrights, circulate throughout the plant, it is likely that cases in this department have resulted in the exposure of large numbers of production workers. Six salaried workers have also been infected, including two in the administration building and several production supervisors. Three cases each have occurred in the hi-lo (forklift) department and in assembly.

Infections in the plant are increasing significantly faster than in surrounding Macomb County. Since October 1, cumulative positive test results in the county increased from 20,226 to 30,192, a 49 percent increase. This means that cumulative cases are rising at SSP about 140 percent faster than positive test results in the surrounding community.

While all of the automakers no doubt have detailed statistical breakdowns of infections at all of its plants, it is impossible for us to know with certainty how representative the situation at SSP is for the auto industry as a whole. But there is nothing to suggest that the plant is unique. It lies upon a major auto corridor in Macomb County, with Sterling Heights Assembly, KUKA Systems and Ford's Sterling Axle and Van Dyke Transmission plants in close proximity. To the south along Mound Road are the GM Tech Center, Warren Truck and Warren Stamping plants. Together, these facilities employ more than 40,000 workers.

What do we currently know? Here is a partial list of the most recent developments, based on information gathered by rank-and-file safety committees and reported to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

- According to a leaked report, there have been at least 59 infections and two deaths at Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit.

- Two weeks ago, separate outbreaks occurred in two departments on opposite sides of Sterling Heights Assembly. Three skilled trades stewards are reportedly out sick.

- There have reportedly been over 100 infections in the last three weeks at FCA's Tipton Transmission Plant, near Kokomo, Indiana.

- According to the Faurecia Gladstone Rank-and-File Safety

Committee, a major outbreak is currently underway at the parts plant in Columbus, Indiana.

- In September, workers at Lear's Hammond, Indiana plant stopped production after discovering two infected workers had been allowed to continue working while awaiting their test results.

- Management at GM's Wentzville Assembly plant in Missouri has resorted to using supervisors to fill COVID-related absences, in violation of the contract.

- At least eight workers at GM's Silao Complex in Guanajuato, Mexico, had died of coronavirus as of August 31.

- In mid-August, the UAW announced 32 new cases at the Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville.

- In early August, local health officials launched an investigation into a possible outbreak at FCA's Belvidere Assembly in northern Illinois.

- In July, 33 year-old contractor Alberto Alvarado died at Ford's Van Dyke Transmission Plant.

- At least 13 infections and one death occurred over the summer at the DENSO parts plant in Battle Creek, Michigan.

- The death of two workers sparked a wildcat strike in June by 3,200 parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico.

- Six Tesla workers in Fremont, California tested positive for COVID-19 in June after CEO Elon Musk defied local lockdown orders to keep the electric vehicle plant operating.

- In late June, shortly after the restart of production, workers stopped production at Jefferson North Assembly Plant after reports of three confirmed cases on "B" crew. This was followed by a work stoppage at SHAP after a materials handler tested positive.

The UAW's own announcements expose their complicity in allowing the virus to spread unchecked throughout the plant. Each text ends with the boilerplate statement: "Management has assured the Union that all safety protocols have been followed." In other words, the UAW is providing management with a blank check.

The UAW's blanket assurances aside, autoworkers know perfectly well that the company routinely disregards elementary safety measures. Workers report to us that management in the plant is not even enforcing the wearing of masks.

Industry-wide, autoworkers are being subjected to byzantine procedures which make even reporting an infected case as difficult as possible. The obvious purpose is to discourage workers from even reporting potential cases. Co-workers at SHAP tell us that they are being told they have not been "exposed," and do not need to get tested or quarantined, if they were around an infected worker for "only" 10 or 12 minutes rather than 15, or

if they worked 12 feet away from them instead of six. Our brothers and sisters at General Motors plants also inform us that GM does not count cases in its own internal figures where tests were administered by workers' doctors instead of GM medical personnel.

Because of this, the real state of the infection may be far higher than suggested by the Sterling Stamping figures. Workers in the plant have informed us that even local UAW committeemen and other officials have privately acknowledged that the real spread of the virus in the plant is higher than has been admitted to the workforce.

Workers have the absolute right to complete and up-to-date information on the spread of the disease. To fight for this right, and to protect their lives and those of the community as a whole, we call on autoworkers to join the rank-and-file safety committee at their plant, or, if one does not exist, to move quickly to form one. We and our sister committees throughout the country are fighting to not only break through the management-UAW information blackout but to provide autoworkers with the means for a counteroffensive against the "herd immunity" policies of the auto companies, completely independent of and in opposition to the UAW and both corporate-controlled parties.

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 public 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.

7. With the welcome news of a possible vaccine, it is more imperative than ever to take emergency measures to shut down non-essential production to save lives. At the same time, the trillions used to bail out Wall Street and the billions in profits pocketed by the auto bosses should be redirected to protect the income of all workers and small businesses affected by the pandemic and provide high-quality, free health care to all.

To join or form a rank-and-file safety committee at your plant, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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