

“COVID-19 is out of control at the Tipton plant”

Workers report dangerous outbreak at Fiat Chrysler transmission factory in Indiana

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Fiat Chrysler workers at the company’s Tipton, Indiana, transmission plant are reporting that the coronavirus is spreading uncontrollably throughout the 800,000 square-foot plant, located 40 miles north of the state capital of Indianapolis. According to company data, approximately 930 production and salaried workers are employed at the plant, which produces nine-speed transmissions for vehicles produced by FCA around the world.

Like other US Midwestern states, Indiana has seen a sharp spike in COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, ICU admissions and deaths over the past several weeks, with a record high 6,654 infections on Thursday, surpassing the record 5,156 cases set the day before. Indiana hospitals were treating 2,569 COVID-19 patients as of Wednesday, health officials said, the most at any point during the pandemic and a 200 percent increase since Governor Eric Holcomb lifted nearly all coronavirus-related restrictions in late September.

The Republican governor said Wednesday that he would put new restrictions in place starting November 15 in 87 of the state’s 92 counties with high levels of community spread. This includes limiting gatherings to less than 25 in red color-coded counties (over 15 percent positivity rates) and to less than 50 in orange-coded counties (10-14.9 percent). The restrictions do not include churches and do nothing more than urge local officials to “consider” limiting the hours of bars, nightclubs and restaurants. At the same time, Holcomb has steadfastly refused to close factories and schools, which are major vectors for the spread of the deadly disease, which has infected 234,000 state residents and killed 4,813.

“COVID-19 is out of control in the Tipton plant, and nobody will help us, the workers,” a veteran worker at the plant wrote in a message to the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*. “People are being forced to come to work and sacrifice themselves and their families. I take care of an elderly parent who is in very bad shape and I have to work around people who know they have COVID-19 but are

afraid to say anything. How could a person live with themselves if they contract this virus and took it home and killed people in their families?”

“We hear there have been as many as 119 cases in the plant over the last three weeks and more than 300 over the last three months. All we can go by is what the floor boss and union stewards tell us. There is no way to confirm the numbers because nothing is made public. The Community Howard Regional Health hospital in Kokomo has a COVID-19 tent set up and the company is sending workers there to be tested.”

A spokesperson for Howard Regional told the WSWs that the hospital, like those across Indiana, has seen a sharp increase in COVID-19 positive patients over the last two weeks. He would not, however, confirm whether these included Fiat Chrysler workers from the Tipton plant or the company’s larger transmission plants in Kokomo.

According to the Indiana State Department of Health’s COVID-19 dashboard, Tipton County had a seven-day average positivity rate of 13.5 percent, nearly 30 percent higher than the state’s 10.5 percent average and the 7.7 percent rate in neighboring Howard County, which includes Kokomo.

Tipton workers say the number of cases in the county are even higher than what is being reported because FCA and the United Auto Workers are concealing the spread of the infection at the plant and forcing workers, including those with COVID-19, to continue working.

“Human Resources has these kids scared to death of retaliation,” another Tipton worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “They fired the janitors’ union steward because she wrote a bunch of grievances over COVID-19, and they have barred her from all Chrysler properties. So many people are scared to report their test results because of retaliation.”

“The HR reps put workers on notice of termination of employment and nobody is getting paid who goes out on

workers' comp cases because the company is disputing all claims. When they do get forced out by medical, Sedgwick [Fiat Chrysler's insurance claims company] is saying that the workers failed to provide their proper paperwork from their doctors, and nobody is getting paid."

Workers have also reported that they have been threatened with termination if they discuss coronavirus outbreaks in the plants on social media.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* called and emailed Fiat Chrysler's spokeswoman for Manufacturing and Labor Communications for a comment on the reports from Tipton workers, but she did not reply. This reporter also left several messages with UAW Local 685 officials, including committeemen in charge of the production and skilled workers in the Tipton plant, but they did not respond either.

A spokesperson from the Indiana State Health Department COVID-19 Hotline said they could not provide any details about where outbreaks were occurring but that county health departments had the information, unless the company was "hiding it." Tipton County health officials, who are closing their offices on Monday because of the spread of the pandemic, said it could take several days, if not weeks, to release such information.

There is no doubt a conspiracy to hide the spread of the virus in factories and workplaces, which involves corporate management, the UAW and other unions, politicians from both corporate-controlled parties, the federal and state occupational safety and health agencies and the news media. All of them fear that if workers knew the truth, they would take action to halt production and save lives. This is what workers did in mid-March with a series of job actions and wildcat strikes in defiance of the UAW at the Tipton plant and other FCA factories in Windsor, Ontario, and in Michigan and Ohio, leading to the closure of the North American auto industry.

It is critical that workers act again to stop the spread of the deadly virus. In every factory and workplace, workers should organize rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW and other unions. These committees should establish lines of communication to unite workers across the auto and other industries to organize strikes and halt all non-essential production.

"We should shut these plants down until its safe," the veteran Tipton worker declared. "Chrysler transmission for damn sure is not an essential need. Hell, they just made \$2.7 billion in the last quarter, but this company doesn't care about any of these workers. The workers here and at other plants have given Tipton a new nickname. It's called PLANT HELL and it's known at the plant that HR runs both the company and our local union."

Another worker added, "We have lost all faith in the union

international and local because they hung us all out to dry and they work for Chrysler. We don't have a voice that gets heard because we don't have millions of dollars. Personally, I'm really getting tired of seeing the rich get richer off the backs of good men and women who work in the factories night after night, destroying our bodies."

What is happening in Tipton is occurring across the US. In Indiana, the Faurecia Gladstone Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was set up in August by auto parts workers in Columbus, Indiana, has reported at least 35 cases at their factory. Allison Transmission workers in Indianapolis have reported 25-30 recent cases.

In neighboring Illinois, the governor recently admitted that factories, warehouses and other workplaces have been the leading source of infections since July. This includes Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant, where workers have formed a rank-and-file safety committee, along with the Fiat Chrysler plant in Belvidere, meatpacking companies, and logistics firms Amazon, UPS and DHL.

In Michigan, there have been major outbreaks at FCA's Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit—where there have been 59 cases and two deaths—and at the nearby Sterling Heights Stamping Plant in suburban Detroit, where at least 17 new cases have been recorded since the start of October, according to a report published this week by the Sterling Heights Assembly Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

With the news of progress towards a potential vaccine, the need for emergency action to close non-essential workplaces, schools and other super-spreader locations is more critical than ever. In addition, rank-and-file committees must fight for full compensation and income security for all workers affected by these shutdowns, along with small businesses and the unemployed. Resources must also be directed to providing universal testing, contact tracing and free medical treatment for all. To pay for this, the massive profits of the auto companies and the trillions spent on the Wall Street bailout must be redirected to protect both the lives and the livelihoods of all working people.

We urge workers to subscribe to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, send in information about conditions in your plant and take up the fight for rank-and-file safety committees in your workplace to shut down all non-essential production and save lives.



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