

Corporate damage control: Detroit News parrots management, UAW lies about COVID safety conditions at US auto plants

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As signs continue to mount of major and deadly outbreaks of coronavirus in the auto plants, the *Detroit News* published an article this week, based entirely on the self-serving statements of United Auto Workers bureaucrats and Detroit auto executives, claiming that the conditions in the plant are pristine, thanks to policies implemented by the union and management.

The piece by the favored newspaper of Detroit big business, “How automakers are reemphasizing COVID-19 protocols as cases rise” is a shameless attempt at damage control as the real situation, which is being documented by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, is spiraling out of control.

Our reporting has uncovered at least 26 infections at Fiat Chrysler’s (FCA) Sterling Stamping Plant (a figure which has since risen), evidence of outbreaks in multiple departments at FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, over 100 cases at the FCA Tipton Transmission north of Indianapolis and a major outbreak at the Faurecia Gladstone parts plant, also in Indiana.

In addition, a whistleblower at FCA Jefferson North Assembly Plant recently leaked a management report, which had been shared with UAW Local 7, showing at least 59 cases and two deaths in the Detroit plant. The document, which contains a detailed breakdown of cases, demonstrates that management and the UAW are carefully tracking the spread in secret, while workers continue to be infected on the line.

That major outbreaks are underway in the auto industry is hardly surprising, given that daily infections in the US are smashing previous records on a daily basis. On Friday, the US recorded more than 183,000 cases and nearly 1,400 deaths. Even Illinois Governor JB Pritzker was compelled to acknowledge that factories and workplaces are a key driver of the new surge in the pandemic. This is corroborated by the *Autoworker Newsletter* which found that cases in Sterling Stamping are rising significantly faster than in the surrounding community.

Though not explicitly mentioning the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, the timing of the article in the *News* suggests it was commissioned by the editors at least partially as a response to our exposures of major outbreaks of COVID-19 in auto plants, especially the recent report from

Sterling Stamping, which has gained a widespread readership.

The *News* account of the pandemic in the auto industry is a lie from beginning to end. It begins by flatly declaring that the virus has been brought under control: “Mask wearing, symptom screenings and physical distancing have proven keys to avoiding COVID outbreaks in U.S. auto plants and keeping them running during the coronavirus pandemic,” it says.

It continues: “Factories across the country were shut down for two months—from late March to mid-May—in the first wave of the pandemic. That led the United Auto Workers to call for caution in reopening plans and widespread testing.”

Through this deft use of passive voice (factories “were shut down”), the *News* continues the cover-up by the corporate press of the wildcat strike wave which forced the shutdown of the industry. The first strikes took place at Sterling Heights Assembly only hours after the UAW announced a deal with the Detroit automakers to keep the plants running. Moreover, the strikes in the United States were part of a global strike wave in the industry spanning from Mexico to Italy against the attempts by the global auto companies to keep production going.

Blindsided by the explosive outrage of autoworkers, who quickly took matters into their own hands, the automakers and the union took advantage of the shutdown to try to ensure that such job actions would not take place again once production reopened.

While lying to workers and the public about the extent of the virus in the plants, management and the UAW are seeking to shift the blame for infections from themselves onto the backs of workers themselves. One of the more grotesque examples was a communique recently circulated in a Detroit area plant instructing workers to social distance from their pets.

Standing reality on its head, the *News* declares: “Detroit automakers are doubling down on efforts to reinforce the *good behaviors of their employees—both inside and outside work*—in hopes of avoiding future shutdowns and keeping their workforce healthy [emphasis added].”

The *News* passes on the bland statements by management and UAW officials that the work environment in the auto plants is completely safe. “The safety protocols are working,” said

Eric Welter, United Auto Workers Local 598 chairman for General Motors Co.'s truck plant in Flint. "Wearing a mask all the time is not a fun day, but it's really important to keeping people protected and safe and healthy. It makes me sleep at night knowing not a bunch of people are getting sick in the factory." In fact, workers are bombarding the *Autoworker Newsletter* with information about how management is not enforcing the wearing of masks, with many supervisors walking the floor without proper personal protective equipment (PPE).

The author also cited the remarks of UAW press spokesperson Brian Rothenberg, who claimed: "[That the virus not spreading] is due to the fact that if someone is exposed outside of the plant, we continue to follow protocols including quarantines of those in the plant exposed to the person who contracted the virus."

Parroting management PR the *News* continues, "Workers themselves, the companies added, have been good about opting out through their daily questionnaires when they feel ill or have been exposed to the virus."

In fact, management is not even informing workers who are potentially exposed. Workers are forced to jump through hoops even to notify management that they have been exposed, and face the loss of income if they quarantine while waiting for test results.

Summing up the situation, one worker at Ford's Dearborn Truck Plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*: "We have had multiple cases, and some we don't find out about until the people return or tell a co-worker. The managers don't inform you—four people I work with closely have had it and I still haven't been notified. [The screening] we have before entering is crap and everyone doesn't always develop a fever—[there is] no safety, nothing really is being pushed."

To provide a token semblance of "balance," the *News* quotes a worker at the FCA Warren Truck plant paint shop. "I don't feel as though the precautions they are taking are enough," the worker said. "I'm homeschooling my child so that there are less germs coming into my plant. What else are we going to do? I've got to pay our checks and bills. It puts you between a rock and a hard place." Warren Truck was one of the plants where work stoppages occurred in March.

The *News* cites a pro forma statement by a Ford official who declares, "If we do have a situation, we will do the right thing for the people. If we have to shut down, we'll shut down." In reality, industry executives such as Mary Barra have categorically ruled out a new shutdown.

The fact that the *News*, seemingly out of the blue and after largely ignoring the conditions in the plants, felt the need to publish an article downplaying the dangers is a testament to the extreme nervousness of the automakers. Having restored the industry to profitability on the basis of a premature reopening and breakneck overwork, including 84-hour workweeks and forced overtime, they know very well that they are sitting on a powder-keg of social anger. It is worth noting that similar fluff

pieces, ascribing a deep concern of the ruthless executives and well-heeled union bureaucrats for the safety of the workforce, had also appeared in March, in the days before wildcat strikes shut down the industry.

"It's all about production," another Dearborn Truck worker said. "They can't care less about people's lives or family when they want you at work to build them cars. It's out of control; we will all be infected if nobody helps us. They need to shut down immediately; it's getting worse and they are covering it up."

As the WSWS explained in March in the week before the wildcats, all rational and scientific approaches to the virus, including a shutdown of nonessential production, collides against the capitalist profit system, which is prepared to sacrifice workers' lives to defend the share values of the major corporations. The logic of this conflict must lead to a mass, international movement of autoworkers, together with workers in every industry, to shut non-essential production, with full compensation for lost hours, and for workers' control over health and safety in the workplace. The massive profits of the auto companies and Wall Street should be used to provide full compensation to workers, small businesses and the unemployed impacted by safety shutdowns.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party are helping workers build a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the trade unions and democratically controlled by workers themselves throughout the world to prepare workers for this struggle. With prospects for a COVID vaccine growing, the fight against the needless exposure of workers is more critical than ever, rather than the enrichment of billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk.

To join the rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace, or for help founding one, contact us today.



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