Workers' lives are worth more than corporate profits!

Workers must stop production to contain coronavirus outbreak at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant!

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

To contact the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee, write to autoworkers@wsws.org.

The Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on workers at SHAP to halt production to stop the spread of COVID-19, which is raging out of control in the factory, and not return to work until conditions are safe.

At least one worker, Mark Bianchi, is already dead, a relative confirmed recently on Facebook, and the United Auto Workers has pulled virtually all of its shop stewards from the floor, pointing to an outbreak potentially larger than anything that has hit US workplaces. Workers report that as many as 25 workers from the paint shop alone were sent home Friday.

SHAP employs more than 7,200 people. It is Fiat Chrysler's largest plant in the US and the largest assembly plant in the Detroit area. It is located in a heavily populated area that also has several other major factories, including FCA Sterling Stamping, where approximately 30 workers are confirmed to be infected.

All of the inadequate precautions that were set up when production restarted in May have been dropped. The break time for cleaning workstations and tools is gone. Sanitizer is not available like it used to be. Even paper towels are hard to find. It is a common sight at the gates to see workers entering the plant with backpacks full of cleaning supplies, purchased at their own expense.

To make matters worse, Fiat Chrysler is planning to move to 24-hour production in January, effectively eliminating all time to clean the plant between shifts and creating the potential for logjams at the gates as workers from different shifts intermingle.

A quarter of a million have died from COVID-19. Daily new cases are nearing 200,000, and the virus is spreading at plants all throughout the country. Illinois Governor JB Pritzker was recently forced to admit that factories were one of the chief drivers for the spread of the virus in his state.

The outbreak at SHAP has been developing for weeks. On November 4, our committee published a statement that revealed outbreaks in two departments on opposite sides of the plant. At least one of the outbreaks was apparently tied to a floater who works in departments throughout the plant, which may have been the initial cause of the outbreak among shop stewards.

Management has abandoned all basic safety measures. If a worker's mask breaks, he or she is frequently unable to get a replacement until lunch. Worse, workers are allowed to leave the plant for lunch and come back without having to go through screening again. While workers line up six feet apart when entering the plant, no such distancing measures are enforced at the end of shifts, and workers pour through the gates much like before the pandemic.

One worker who recently tested positive had been exposed days prior but was instructed not to quarantine because he had not been around the infected worker for longer than 15 minutes. When he first reported symptoms to a supervisor, he was forced to remain on the job for hours until a replacement came.

FCA and the UAW have responded to the outbreak with a massive cover-up backed by the corporate media. Meanwhile, management is threatening us with immediate termination for exposing the truth. UAW Local 1700 President Louie Pahl sent an open letter to the workforce warning us not to post on social media about conditions in

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the plant.

In the third quarter, FCA made $1.4 billion in profit, and the US auto industry made as many cars as it did the same time last year. The auto bosses made up for lost time through brutal speedup, including seven-day workweeks and mandatory overtime, and through using temporary workers as virtual slaves to replace workers who have taken time off due to health concerns.

While he is pulling his own shop stewards out of the plant, Pahl has the gall to tell workers to remain on the job and wait for Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to issue new lockdown orders. He knows full well that such an order will never come, and that even if it does it would exempt auto plants as "essential" businesses, just like Whitmer's original order in the spring.

In March, workers at SHAP took the lead and halted production, refusing to work under unsafe conditions. This helped spark a wildcat strike wave that spread throughout the country, forcing management and its UAW lackeys to back down from their plans to continue operating the plants, and saving countless lives.

Once again, there is widespread support for another walkout at SHAP. The watchword for many is, "There is always the blue line"—referring to the line running along the floors behind our workstations which we stepped back over when we stopped production in March and again in June.

Workers' lives are more important than corporate profits! The outbreak poses a severe public safety risk. If all of the shop stewards are being quarantined, then we must all stop work! There is no way to operate the plant safely under such conditions.

To save lives, autoworkers should walk out of the SHAP. They should not return until the following demands have been met:

• Full pay, without any bureaucratic rigmarole, for workers who have been exposed and have to quarantine.

• Immediately notify workers who have been exposed to coronavirus.

• Daily testing of the entire workforce.

• Make public the secret records of infections and exposures kept by management and the UAW.

• Professional cleaning of the entire facility before each shift.

• Six-hour shifts instead of 10, to ensure ample time for cleaning and to limit workers' potential exposure.

• Abandon the company's move to 24-hour production in January.

• End to the use of floaters who can potentially spread infections.

• Workers' control over line speed and production to ensure proper cleaning and sufficient rest time.

• End the exploitation of temps. All TPTs must immediately be hired in as full-time.

• End chronic manpower shortages in skilled trades by filling all vacancies, beginning with qualified production workers.

• Workers have the right to free speech! End all management and union threats for social media posts or speaking to the press.

These measures are absolutely necessary whether they cut into production quotas or not. The guiding principle must be that the health and lives of workers and our loved ones must take precedence over profits of FCA and Wall Street.

To fight for this program, join the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee today! Contact the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* at autoworkers@wsws.org to get involved.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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