

“If Whitmer were really concerned about COVID-19, she would never have allowed manufacturing to re-open”

Sterling Heights Assembly workers demand shutdown as coronavirus spreads in factories throughout US

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Support is growing among autoworkers throughout the country for a nationwide shutdown of the auto industry to contain the spread of the pandemic.

On Sunday night, Michigan health officials acknowledged that manufacturing and construction sites were among the top locations for COVID-19 outbreaks in the state, but these were explicitly left out of Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s partial lockdown measures.

Last week, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker also admitted that outbreaks in industrial locations, including auto factories, meatpacking and food processing plants and logistics firms, were one of the chief drivers of the new surge.

In the Detroit area, the most significant outbreak appears to be taking place at Fiat Chrysler’s Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), the largest auto plant in the area. All of the shop stewards for United Auto Workers Local 1700 have been sent home to quarantine and at least one worker, Mark Bianchi, is already dead. A worker informed the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that 25 people in the paint department alone were sent home on Friday due to exposure.

In opposition to the UAW’s support for management sacrificing workers’ lives for profit, the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee issued a statement on Saturday calling for a work stoppage to halt production to save lives and to demand full compensation for all affected workers. The committee calls on workers not to return to work until all necessary safety measures have been taken, including daily testing of the entire workforce, full pay for workers under quarantine, the immediate

publication of all cases in the plant and an end to company and UAW intimidation against workers who speak out to the media or on Facebook.

Just south of SHAP, the virus is also raging out of control at FCA Sterling Stamping Plant. Over 30 infections have now been confirmed. Yesterday UAW Local 1264 closed its union hall and several “committeemen, stewards and a benefit rep” have been sent home, according to the local. However, even as its own officials are being sent home to quarantine, the UAW is insisting that workers remain on the job to produce profits for the auto companies. A detailed analysis of the outbreak at Sterling Stamping was published last week on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“We need to close down, test everyone and start over,” one furious Sterling Stamping worker said. “Also enforce mask mandates that a large percentage of our brothers and sisters are not following. Our senior workforce is very vulnerable!”

Workers are also reporting that major outbreaks are underway at other Detroit-area plants, including Warren Truck and Warren Stamping.

All of these plants are located in major population centers, heightening the danger that the disease is spreading outward from the factories into the surrounding communities. “There are [7,000] people inside this plant who travel here from all over the state,” one SHAP worker said. “They take COVID-19 50 miles north and spread it to their families and friends.”

Sunday evening, Governor Whitmer, a Democrat, announced a three-week partial lockdown for the state. The measures exempt manufacturing, construction and other workplaces even though the state Department of Health and Human Services said, “Michigan’s house is on fire,” and the

governor warned that the state was on a path to see as many as 1,000 people dying every week. Michigan already has 251,813 confirmed cases and 7,994 deaths.

While in-person learning for older students at colleges and high schools will be suspended for three weeks, K-8 schools will remain open, in order to ensure that parents will be able to remain at work. The exception will be in Detroit, which was forced to end K-12 in person schooling last week.

Every serious public health care expert knows that the spread of deadly contagion cannot be contained unless non-essential production and schools and universities are closed. But the entire political establishment—from Trump and the Republicans, to Biden, Whitmer and the Democrats—are completely opposed to such measures. Within hours of calling for a six-week national lockdown, with all wages and income for workers guaranteed by the federal government, renowned infectious disease expert Michael Osterholm, a member of President-elect Joe Biden's transition team, was forced to take back his statements after Biden transition officials made it clear the president-elect was against a national shutdown.

"If Whitmer were really concerned about COVID-19, she would never have allowed manufacturing to re-open in the first place," the SHAP worker said.

Sunday's announcement also explodes the desperate attempts by United Auto Workers (UAW) officials at Sterling Heights to prevent a job action by workers to halt production. Over the weekend, UAW Local 1700 officials circulated a statement combining threats against workers for their social media use with a call for them to look to Whitmer to enforce another lockdown, suggesting that she was responsible for closing the plants last March. Whitmer never shut down the Michigan auto industry, which was deemed an "essential business" and exempted from her executive order in March.

The auto industry was only shut down from late-March to May because of a wildcat strike wave, which included workers at SHAP and quickly spread throughout the country, initiated by workers outraged that production was continuing even as schools and restaurants were closed. By taking the initiative into their own hands and in defiance of the UAW, autoworkers were able to save countless lives.

There is growing support at SHAP and other factories for another wildcat. "I hope we stop production," another SHAP worker said. "It's terrible. There's no safety. They are not notifying people if people are infected. It was only the walkouts by workers that helped us to close the industry. The union is not helping us, not keeping us safe."

A third SHAP worker with six years at Fiat Chrysler said, "The plants should be shut down. We're around our co-workers in the plant for a longer time than we are with our

families. Right now, its boiling over at SHAP and also the Sterling Stamping plant. I don't want to bring this disease home to my children or my parents.

"Workers who are exposed are being told they should not take time off. They're saying you have to have been exposed to an infected person for 15 minutes before you can take off. It's like they're telling workers: 'You don't have it, get back to work.' And a lot of the workers who are quarantined aren't getting compensation.

"At the entrance they have a machine that takes your temperature but that doesn't catch asymptomatic workers who can spread COVID inside the plant. We used to have additional break times to clean and sanitize our workstations, but they've taken most of them away.

"Now they are talking about running the plant 24 hours a day, with five or six eight-hour days, instead of four, 10-hour days. We'll be on tag relief, with a shift coming in right after us with little or no time for social distancing.

"They want us to work through the holidays, saying we already had two months off when the industry was shut down. We'll be working every weekend through New Year. There won't even be time for the plant to air out.

"They don't want to shut down the plant, they just want to keep car production going. But we're going to have to make them close just like we did in March."

Autoworkers at SHAP and other plants must take matters into their own hands by expanding the network of rank-and-file safety committees and fighting for the immediate shutdown of non-essential production and full compensation to workers, small businesses, the unemployed and all those affected by the pandemic. This means a fight to redirect the vast profits of the giant auto companies and the trillions handed over to Wall Street by both corporate-controlled parties to fight the pandemic and protect both the lives and livelihoods of workers and their families.

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.



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