

# As COVID-19 spreads in workplaces, US autoworkers call for emergency action to save lives

Shannon Jones  
16 November 2020

With COVID-19 outbreaks surging across the US and record levels of infections, demands are growing among autoworkers to shut down the plants, which have become major vectors of transmission. The seriousness of the situation is highlighted by developments in the Detroit area, where major outbreaks have been reported at Fiat Chrysler plants in the northern suburb of Sterling Heights.

On Monday, over 8,000 new cases were reported in Michigan, while Illinois had over 11,000 and Ohio 5,700. Nationwide, the US is reporting near 150,000 daily new cases with over 8,000 deaths in the last week, bringing total deaths to over one quarter of a million.

On Saturday, the Sterling Heights Assembly Rank-and-File Safety Committee issued a statement calling for a work stoppage to halt production to save lives and demand full compensation for workers. It reported that all United Auto Workers Local 1700 shop stewards at the plant have been sent home to quarantine and at least one worker, Mark Bianchi, is already dead. Many supervisors are out with COVID-19, including all three skilled trades supervisors. One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that 25 people in the paint department alone were sent home on Friday due to exposure.

At the nearby Sterling Stamping plant, at least 30 cases are being reported. The UAW has closed its union hall and several local stewards and reps have been sent home while the union insists that workers continue production.

At the Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) in Detroit, a member of the JNAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee reported that an entire team on the “B” crew engine line was sent home after a worker tested positive for COVID-19. Last month, the UAW admitted that at least 59 JNAP workers had been infected and two had died since May.

Workers say that basic safety measures, such as the mask policy, are not being strictly enforced. Screening is being done in a perfunctory and haphazard manner. Workers are not able to keep proper social distancing, with workers packed together at the exits.

Even workers that exhibit COVID-19 symptoms are sometimes not being tested. Workers are not being informed of COVID-19 cases in their departments or even COVID-19 deaths. Management makes it so difficult to collect pay when workers are infected that some would prefer not to get tested and continue reporting to work. Complaints filed with the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration are routinely ignored.

A worker at another Detroit area auto plant, Fiat Chrysler Warren Stamping, said, “We have had two union officials die and also a team leader in the early months of the pandemic. One area was blocked off for a possible case (pending test results) from a supervisor who showed symptoms on Thursday. People have been working in that area all day and the company is just now taking precautions. Also, today a contractor working in another area tested positive. They sent all personnel working in that area home, blocked it off, and none of the employees working 15 feet from the affected area were notified.

“A sanitization company was called in but could not make it in a timely manner because they were busy sanitizing two other possible cases at Warren Truck at the time.

“I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I said at least one case per week has occurred, and some weeks two cases, since the beginning of May. That’s at least 24 cases that we are aware of. The rank and file are not being made aware of incidents until at least the next day unless we witness the sanitization ourselves and spread the news to others. Rank-and-file workers are being forced to work within six feet

of each other. And people working near COVID positive employees are just moved to other parts of the plant to work with other employees while the company sanitizes the affected area, possibly spreading it to others.”

On Monday, president-elect Joe Biden held a virtual meeting with the heads of major unions and major retail, auto and tech company executives. Among those attending were AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, UAW President Rory Gamble and the leaders of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and other unions. Corporate representatives included General Motors CEO Mary Barra, Microsoft president and CEO Satya Nadella, Target chairman and CEO Brian Cornell, and Sonia Syngal, CEO of Gap.

According to remarks released by the AFL-CIO, Trumka said, “We need to make sure all COVID-19 cases are counted and reported so we know where the major outbreaks are before they get worse.” The fact is the AFL-CIO, UAW, UFCW and other unions are chiefly responsible for concealing information about outbreaks because they know that workers will take matters into their own hands and halt production.

Biden announced that his administration would rely more heavily on the unions to suppress the class struggle, “Unions are going to have increased power [in a Biden administration],” he said. Reports said the corporate CEOs nodded in response.

While admitting that “we face a dark winter ahead,” Biden made it clear that he proposed no serious measures to halt the spread of the pandemic. This was underscored at a press conference later in the day where Biden refused to respond to questions about a national lockdown over COVID-19. In fact, Biden is just as opposed as President Trump to any measures to fight the virus that might impact corporate profits.

On Sunday, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced new emergency measures under the state’s public health code to slow the spread of coronavirus, including a three-week closure starting Wednesday of all colleges and high schools in the state. Also impacted are eat-in dining at restaurants and other recreational and entertainment activities. Whitmer explicitly exempted factories and construction sites, even though Michigan’s chief medical director said they were a major source of outbreaks, along with nursing homes and schools.

No one at the press conference asked why the governor’s health order excludes auto plants and other factories as well as K-8 schools? The answer is obvious: The factories must be kept open at all costs to feed the

profits of the corporation and Wall Street. Elementary schools must also be kept in session to free parents to continue working.

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Warren Truck plant who was infected with the virus said, “I’m infected now because the company does not take proper steps to keep the plant safe. At least five or six people in my area at the plant got infected and are out.

“On the exits, there is no social distancing at all. It’s terrible! People are packed together when we go through the exits. The only time we can finally social distance is when we get to the parking lot.

“We are the city. Workers come from counties all over the area and then if they get infected, they bring it into neighborhoods all around. We need to shut it all down.

“If we had even been informed of the infections in the plant, I could have been spared. And my family—my wife, two kids and my sister.

“The company just doesn’t care how many of us get sick.”

Urgent action is needed. We call on autoworkers and all workers to build and expand the network of rank-and-file safety committees to fight for an immediate halt to all non-essential production until the virus is contained. All workers must be fully compensated during the shutdown along with small businesses and others affected by the pandemic. The enormous fortunes being accumulated by the Wall Street billionaires must be redirected to meet pressing human needs. Life must take precedence over private profit.

Workers who want to get involved in this fight should contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**