

Growing support among workers for shutdown of nonessential production as US death toll tops 250,000

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Anger is growing at US factories and workplaces as the coronavirus pandemic rages out of control. The death toll has surpassed 250,000, and new cases and hospitalizations are rising sharply in nearly every state in the country. Workers, however, are being kept on the job, forced to risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones for profit.

The concerns and opposition of workers are largely ignored by the corporate media. However, articles published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on the spread of the contagion in workplaces are being widely read by workers and circulated on social media.

One worker at the GM assembly plant in Flint, Michigan, wrote to the WSWS: “I feel that each plant should test every employee and send us home for quarantine for two weeks and cut all overtime until this virus has slowed down!”

A worker at a Fiat Chrysler parts plant in Michigan wrote, “Don’t forget about us here at the Marysville Axle Plant. We have dozens of employees and supervisors out due to Covid and almost no safety protocol except temperature checks at the door. Not a single person here feels like their lives matter. Car parts are more important than our lives.”

Similar conditions prevail throughout the country and in every industry. Mike Hull, a victimized Texas educator and founder of the Facebook group “Teachers against Dying,” told the WSWS: “Too many people are getting forced out, too many are dying, and the sickening thing is how much it was preventable. There has to be an urgency.”

Workers are demanding collective action. At the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), where at least one worker, Mark Bianchi, has recently died, workers are discussing “going to the blue line,” that is, downing their tools and moving to a safe area away from the assembly

line. This is what SHAP workers and other Fiat Chrysler workers in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Canada, did in mid-March, forcing the closure of the North American auto industry and other lockdowns, which saved the lives of tens of thousands of people.

Educators, nurses and other workers are already taking action. As hospitals are overwhelmed with a flood of COVID-19 patients, 800 Philadelphia-area nurses at the Saint Mary’s Medical Center in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, walked out Tuesday to demand adequate staffing and protective gear and decent wages.

With educators gambling with their lives each time they are forced to enter a school building, teachers in Utah organized a sickout last week, and so did educators in Midland, Texas, where it was announced Tuesday that Midland High teacher John Anthony had died of COVID-19. On Friday, teachers in Alabama are organizing a protest and seeking support from autoworkers at the Hyundai plant in Montgomery. After weeks of rising infections and demands by teachers to halt in-school instruction, New York City schools will close today, despite the best efforts of the Democratic Party-run city and state governments to keep them open.

The entire political establishment is opposed to the most elementary action needed to save lives: the immediate shutdown of nonessential businesses, schools and universities until the pandemic is under control.

The mere suggestion last week by epidemiologist Michael Osterholm, a member of Biden’s coronavirus task force, that there should be a four- to six-week lockdown, combined with full income for those affected, led to a selloff on Wall Street, immediate disavowals by the Biden transition team, and Trump’s declaration that “this administration will not be going to a lockdown,” which led to a recovery of share values.

The massive loss of life is the product of definite policies, which serve definite class interests. The Trump administration and the Democratic Party first concealed the dangers of the pandemic to protect the stock market and prevent widespread walkouts by workers. After the passage of the bipartisan CARES Act in late March, both parties launched the back-to-work campaign to force workers to pay for the massive bailout of the super-rich.

Congress then deliberately allowed federal jobless aid to expire by July, leading to a staggering half-a-trillion-dollar fall in personal income. It has refused to pass a new stimulus package, leaving some 12 million jobless workers in danger of losing their unemployment aid by Christmas. The aim is to starve workers to risk their lives on the job.

Workers want to take action to stop the spread of the virus. They know that every day they go into work they are risking their lives and the lives of their family members. Many are asking, however, how they can get by if they are not working. "I really don't know what to do because I really can't afford to stop working," one autoworker in Flint, Michigan, told the WWSW. "I'm still suffering financially from the shutdown back in March. But on the other hand, I don't want to spread this disease to my loved ones."

The "choice" workers are being forced to make, between sacrificing their health or their economic well-being, is premised on the subordination of the response to the pandemic to the profits of the corporations and the wealth of the ruling class.

The Socialist Equality Party demands a halt to all nonessential production and the immediate closure of schools and universities. While masks and social distancing are necessary, such measures will not stop the spread of the virus in workplaces. As for the possibility that a vaccine will be widely available sometime next year, this makes it all the more necessary to take every action now to save lives.

This must be accompanied by full compensation to all workers affected by the shutdowns, including \$1,000 a week so they can live, along with the suspension of student and credit card payments, rent and mortgages. Small businesses must be made whole, so they can survive until the pandemic is under control.

A massive allocation of resources is needed to ensure that children have state-of-the-art technology and high-speed internet connections for remote learning, parents have the means to care for children, and the psychological and social problems associated with a period of isolation

are adequately and compassionately addressed. A massive public works program must be launched to build the infrastructure necessary to distribute the vaccine when it is available and to provide regular testing, contact tracing and free medical treatment to contain and finally eradicate the disease.

The resources for this exist. Trillions of dollars have been handed out to the banks and corporations to fuel the record rise in the stock markets, amidst mass death and social devastation. The private fortunes of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and the rest of America's billionaires have grown by \$637 billion. GM, Ford and FCA piled up nearly \$8 billion in profits in the third quarter alone. The giant for-profit hospital chains HCA, Tenet and Universal, all bailed out with public funds, saw a rise in third-quarter profits.

The fight against the pandemic is not only a medical issue. It is a political struggle. The necessary measures to save lives require a frontal assault on the wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy, which controls both political parties.

To take the necessary action, workers need new organizations of struggle, independent of the unions, to build up support for walkouts and a general strike to halt production. Throughout this crisis, the unions have been irrelevant. Where they exist, they have simply mouthed the lies of the corporate executives and politicians about "reopening safely" while concealing information about outbreaks.

Autoworkers, teachers and other workers are building a network of rank-and-file safety committees to coordinate this fight. These initiatives must be broadened and expanded to encompass every section of the working class, and to unite the struggles of workers in the US with workers in Europe, Latin America and throughout the world.

The struggle to defend health and safety of workers must be combined with the building of a powerful political movement of the working class in the US and internationally which is aimed at establishing workers' power, seizing the ill-gotten fortunes of the super-rich and reorganizing economic life along socialist lines, based on the principles of human solidarity and social equality.



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