

“There has to be a complete shutdown, that is the only way to get things under control”

Support builds among autoworkers for emergency action as pandemic spreads throughout factories

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With COVID-19 spreading rapidly and unchecked throughout auto manufacturing plants in the US, workers are speaking out with increasing outrage over the efforts of the companies and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union to continue production at all costs.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* is receiving daily reports of harrowing conditions at worksites (the names of workers have been changed to protect against retaliation). Even the limited and inadequate safety measures instituted in May following the reopening of auto plants are being flouted by management.

“There is a lot of panic at the plant,” said Mary, a temporary part time worker at Fiat Chrysler’s Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit. “During breaks we all discuss how scared we are about either coming down with the virus or spreading it to other family members. I suffer from anxiety after losing four people who were very close to me back in April. They all died back to back, it was horrible and very tragic. I still struggle with this.”

All signs point to COVID-19 raging out of control at levels that exceed last March, before the temporary shutdown of auto production in North America. For the week ending Nov. 12, the state of Michigan reported 28 new and 63 ongoing outbreaks at manufacturing and construction sites around the state, defining the clusters as two or more cases traced to a worksite. Another 59 new outbreaks were reported at long-term care facilities and 57 at K-12 schools.

As of Thursday, the state reported a total of 285,398 cases and 8,324 deaths to date, with 7,592 cases reported in just the previous 24 hours.

Similar numbers are being reported across the industrial Midwest—11,648 new cases in Illinois, 7,787 in Ohio and 7,281 in Indiana. The US death toll is now over a quarter million, the highest number for any country.

A number of states, including Michigan, have issued new restrictions, closing gathering places such as high schools and colleges, restaurants, bars and sporting events. However, factories, a major source of disease transmission, are exempt, with state officials bowing to the demands of corporate owners not to stop production and the flow of profits. In line with this, K-8 schools are also being allowed to stay open to free workers to return to the plants.

Workers are confronting the brutal reality of a capitalist system that prioritizes profit over human lives.

“The company is bringing in temporary workers like you would herd in cows,” Mary continued. “It feels like being a slave for a company that doesn’t really care anything about you, but only how much you can produce for them. We are only making a little over \$15 an hour and because the plant is very far from my house, I wind up spending a lot of money each month on gas.”

According to some workers’ estimates, the number of positive COVID-19 cases has reached 33 at the General Motors CCA (Customer Care and Aftersales) parts warehouse in the Flint, Michigan, suburb of Burton, although that number has not been confirmed.

A CCA worker reported, “There’s no social distancing. A lot of people are still doubled up working together, even training new temporary workers. There’s limited disinfectant. The hand sanitizer dispensers are slowly being removed when they need to be refilled. I don’t even know how many positive cases there have been because the company is not saying and they use the HIPAA privacy laws to justify not reporting anything at all to the workers. We aren’t being told anything at all, just left in the dark.”

Patti, a worker at Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit (JNAP), told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “People are coming in who were exposed to coronavirus, but they are not being sent home. To me we are in a pandemic, there is no way we should drop the ball.

“We should be doing everything we can to keep people safe.”

A worker at the suburban Detroit Fiat Chrysler Warren Truck plant said, “Since we came back on Sept. 28 we have eight teams out currently due to COVID-19. There are six or eight people on each team. Since we have returned we no longer have any cleaner and we no longer have extra time to clean down either. The teams are out all over the plant.”

“Honestly, I feel really afraid,” said Bill, a worker at a Tenneco plant in Marshall, Michigan, who recently spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter* along with his wife, Christina. There are two Tenneco plants in Marshall in southwest Michigan, employing some 600–700 workers to produce mufflers and other parts for major auto companies.

“There have been at least 10 cases in the past four days, including some within my team,” Bill said. “Management has been taking employees’ temperatures, but it doesn’t really feel like that does

anything. They've tried to set up social distancing and masking, but they really aren't in a position to enforce these measures and they routinely get flouted."

Christina added, "While we're able to home school our children, many other parents in the area are struggling because they can't afford to miss work. And that puts them in a situation where they risk getting sick."

A worker at the General Motors Flint Assembly plant said, "Right now there are positive COVID cases happening at our plant. Management does what it can to downplay it in order to keep people from panicking. And on top of that, the pressure is always on because they will never hesitate to replace you with a temp who'll do your job for less pay."

In May the UAW assisted the companies in reopening the plants, serving as marketing reps hawking a series of totally inadequate safety measures to workers. This followed a series of wildcat job actions by autoworkers in Canada, the US and Mexico that forced a temporary halt to auto production in North America. Now the UAW has remained silent while management flouts even these token measures.

Patti, the worker at FCA JNAP, noted, "When you have over 200,000 people dead from the coronavirus, that's a big problem. The UAW is not saying anything. They are not trying to protect us. We can't get anyone to listen to our complaints. I can't keep doing my job when I could be affected by the mistakes they are making. I am witnessing it every day."

Mary from SHAP added, "What upsets me is that the company and the union don't care that people are dying. Why are we paying dues to an organization that doesn't speak for our interests?"

"We already know that the union won't do anything to protect us in this situation," the GM worker observed, "Look at what happened last year—we had a company-wide national strike last year and not only did things not improve in our contracts, but now we have to worry about getting sick."

While the pandemic spreads and workers die, the auto companies are coining huge profits off workers' lives. General Motors, Fiat Chrysler and Ford all reported billions each in third quarter profits, with production and sales rebounding to near pre-pandemic levels, despite the implementation of bogus safety protocols. Remarkably, North American auto producers built 4.1 million vehicles in the third quarter, the same number as in 2019.

From these experiences workers are more and more drawing the conclusion that the capitalist economic order is fundamentally bankrupt and that a far-reaching social reorganization is needed.

Patti remarked, "I don't think we as workers should be put under this kind of stress when they don't follow the rules. They would rather put profit before lives. Everyone knows that. Cases are growing in the plant. But they don't care. All they say is build those Jeeps and don't worry about it. But how can you tell people not to worry about something that affects them and their household."

"These big corporations are making billions of dollars at the risk of people's lives. We are the big movers as far as the economy is concerned. Of course they are going to say we are not going to shut that down. I was told that every 10 minutes that a line is shut down for repairs, that is \$10,000."

The Warren Truck worker added, "They do not care about their employees; we are just a number. In years past people have died working the line and all they did was say move the body and start the line back up."

Workers are increasingly voicing their support for the call by the

Autoworker Newsletter and the Socialist Equality Party to halt all non-essential production and provide full compensation to workers until the pandemic is contained. The reports of progress towards an effective vaccine make all the more criminal the unnecessary sacrifice of human lives for the sake of production.

Mary said, "Action needs to be taken now! I feel that there should be a mass walkout, but this will only be effective if we all do it together."

Added Patti, "Most of the workers are disappointed. They feel they should shut down, but if they say anything they fear being fired. People are not saying a lot on the line because they told you if you say anything or post online you can be fired."

A worker at the FCA Kokomo, Indiana, transmission complex said, "I am in support of closure with compensation. The virus is spreading, and if they don't shut down, it will be worse after people gather for the holidays."

The situation and countless lives depend on workers themselves taking the initiative. The Socialist Equality Party and the *Autoworker Newsletter* are assisting with the formation of a network of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to build up support for walkouts and a general strike to halt non-essential production to save lives.

A member of the Jefferson North Rank-and-File Safety Committee told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "There has to be a complete shutdown, that is the only way to get things under control; there is strength in numbers. Just like autoworkers took a stand in March, we have to do it again. There is no choice."

"The union and management are making it very obvious that the lives of the workers are not of importance."

"It was workers who took action in March when the number of cases were rising rapidly. Because we stood up and accomplished solidarity across the board we forced a two-month shutdown."

"Workers have to understand that there is power in numbers. Neither the governors nor mayor care enough about our lives to force the companies to stop and clean and create a cleaner, safer work space for us. Rank-and-file committees must demand workers unite and stand for what's right—our lives!!"

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the *Autoworker Newsletter* encourage workers to share your stories. Contact us today to find how you can become involved at your plant.



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wws.org/contact