

FCA ramps up production at Warren Truck despite death of temporary worker from COVID-19

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Despite deadly outbreaks of the coronavirus in its factories, Fiat Chrysler has begun a drive to increase production at its Warren Truck Assembly Plant near Detroit.

The death of a temporary part-time (TPT) worker from the plant's paint shop, Stevie Brown, one week ago from COVID-19 has been covered up by the United Auto Workers union, but information about the circumstances continues to emerge from workers. Brown had been hired less than three weeks before getting sick and testing positive for the virus. He was not a young man. Brown was 56 years old and told other workers that he had waited a long time to get the chance for a job at FCA.

Shortly after he tested positive, all eight other workers in blackout—the designation for the area that newly-painted vehicles wait before being sent back on the assembly line—were sent out for testing and possible quarantine. At least one other worker was infected. None of this information has been released by the UAW, which has been seeking to keep workers in the factories and maintain the companies' flow of profits.

Based on the extremely limited information that has been released by the UAW and management, Warren Truck has been the Detroit Three's deadliest plant in the US during the pandemic, with four workers from the factory succumbing to COVID-19 by April, and now at least the fifth (Stevie Brown) having fallen victim. FCA's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, just a few miles to the north, has also been hard hit, with three deaths in the spring and a growing outbreak in recent weeks killing at least one more worker, Mark Bianchi.

Based on the information workers manage to circulate

by word of mouth, the outbreak is continuing to spread throughout Warren Truck. A worker posted on Facebook, "It sucks when you walk to a team & the whole team is being sent home for COVID smh [shaking my head]." Another worker contacted the WSWs to say that a team leader was diagnosed with COVID-19 Wednesday night.

In March, autoworkers rebelled against the lack of protection from the pandemic by carrying out wildcat strikes and work stoppages in Europe and North America, including at FCA's Warren Truck and Sterling Heights plants, forcing the shutdown of the auto industry. Since the premature return to work in May, workers have begun to organize independent rank-and-file safety committees at a number of factories, calling for a shutdown of non-essential production and full compensation for all affected workers in order to save lives.

Even though the coronavirus pandemic has been surging out of control throughout Midwestern states, the auto companies have been pushing production to a breakneck pace, with a number of plants implementing mandatory overtime and temporary workers being hired in droves.

At Warren Truck, shifts have been increased to 10 hours. A worker told the WSWs that in one shift last week 201 vehicles came off the line. Rumors are circulating among workers that management wants to increase the quota to 500.

In addition, the newly designed Jeep Wagoneer is being introduced into the line in small batches, less than 15 at a time. The pre-production vehicle is being described on the shop floor as a "concept car" and requires significantly more labor than production

models.

The company, with the assistance of the UAW, is making it impossible for workers to know if they've been exposed to the virus at the plants. FCA management previously sent out letters to employees threatening termination for taking photos, posting comments on social media or discussing the conditions inside the plants.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has been the primary source of information about the spread of the virus in the factories and has served as a platform for workers to organize and speak out against unsafe working conditions. Because of this, the WSWS has come under attack from the UAW, which defends the profit interests of the companies and is thus terrified of workers being informed of the real state of the pandemic and taking action to protect themselves.

Last weekend, UAW Local 1700 President Louie Pahl and Vice President Tavares Oliver at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant took to their podcast to browbeat workers, saying, "Don't believe anything you see or read on social media. Especially this website." Unable to point to a single incident of false information, their comments can be explained only as intimidation of the workforce in order to enforce the company's ruthless production drive.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to conceal that workplaces, particularly the gigantic automotive facilities that employ thousands of workers in close quarters, are major vectors of infection. Less than two weeks ago Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer was compelled to admit that manufacturing facilities were one of the biggest spreaders of the pandemic. According to the state's latest publicly released data, there are 43 new and 93 ongoing outbreaks at manufacturing and construction sites as of November 23.

The cover-up of the spread of COVID-19 in the plants and the intransigence of the companies' murderous drive to keep the plants running no matter the suffering and death which results is provoking growing anger among thousands of workers.

In response to the news of Brown's death, a worker at Warren Truck voiced his outrage to the WSWS over the lack of safety protocols in the plant and the pro-company role played by the UAW. "There's no social distancing. I looked today, the lunch tables aren't even

six feet apart.

"Here we are, in the belief that we have a union, that we're protected. We're not. I don't know how it operates, but the union reps know that they have to do what the company wants or there won't be any job for them. There's a script and somebody has to read it.

"Nobody cares. It's us who are on the front lines. Just like the nurses that are being overwhelmed at the hospitals."

Voicing his conviction that the plants should be shut down to bring the pandemic under control, he said, "We have to pause. We're in a hard place right now. I don't like it."

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter will provide every assistance to workers in organizing rank-and-file safety committees to stop the pandemic, save lives and defend workers' interests. Contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org to get involved, or to share information about conditions at your plant.



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