

“Are any of these trucks worth any of our brothers and sisters dying?”

COVID-19 cases explode at GM Fort Wayne as UAW abets cover-up

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30 November 2020

In recent weeks the General Motors Fort Wayne Assembly Plant in northeastern Indiana has seen a rash of COVID-19 cases. Despite the fact that multiple positive cases have been reported in single departments, the company and the United Auto Workers (UAW) are maintaining the threadbare lie that no transmission is taking place within the plant.

The situation at Fort Wayne Assembly mirrors what is happening at other auto plants across the US Midwest and South, which are becoming vectors of COVID-19 transmission. Indiana has had 342,000 cases and 5,723 deaths through Monday, according to Johns Hopkins. Allen County, where the FWA plant is located, had 5,229 new cases between November 18 and 28 alone.

Fort Wayne Assembly employs over 4,200 workers building the highly profitable GMC Sierra and Chevrolet Silverado light trucks. It is touted by GM as one of its most productive plants, building more than 1,000 trucks a day which typically sell in the \$30,000- \$50,000 price range. Under pressure from Wall Street and with inventory levels for the Sierra down to 20 days, GM is attempting to maintain three full production shifts using temporary workers—who start at \$16.67 an hour—to fill in for those out with COVID-19.

Day after day, GM management issues new memos noting COVID-19 cases in the plant that begin with the saccharine claim, “The health and safety of our employees and everyone who enters our facilities is our top priority.” Inevitably, the list of new cases ends with the disclaimer “and all are unrelated to one another.” Management continues to brazenly assert, without challenge from the UAW, that all cases in the plant are being contracted outside of the facility.

Management memos obtained by the *World Socialist*

Web Site Autoworker Newsletter document 50 cases in the plant between November 6 and November 23. Eleven cases were reported November 20 alone, indicating the rate of infection is increasing. The cases include four second shift trim employees and two third shift trim employees, a first shift and second shift chassis employee and others from various departments. All, of course, were “unrelated.”

This absurd narrative has evoked anger and disgust from GM Fort Wayne workers.

One wrote ironically on Facebook, “This is the safest place to be because no one gets COVID at GM.

“Nine in two days just in Trim – all outside of work LOL.”

Another posted, “42 cases in less than two weeks ... I did hear that on the door line one whole team is off on quarantine.”

Another said, “Cases are in the hundreds I bet...they don’t tell us the total number of cases because they don’t want the media to find out...and if we knew, more people would defer from coming to work.. IF YOU DON’T HAVE ANYTHING TO HIDE, DON’T ACT LIKE YOU ARE HIDING SOMETHING FROM THE PEOPLE.”

Others wrote, “Bottom line is they don’t care about it. All they care about is trucks off the line. Everything else is for show.”

“We all need to shut down again, but GM is all about making money. F-- family first, its BS.”

The abandonment of even the largely cosmetic COVID-19 safety protocols implemented after the reopening of the auto plants last May following a series of wildcat walkouts over COVID-19 by autoworkers in Michigan, Windsor, Ontario, Ohio and Indiana has

allowed the virus to increasingly run rampant. Yet management, with the full complicity of the UAW, claims that there is no virus spread in the plants and intimidates workers who speak out against the dangers.

Others explain the incredible run-around that workers experience trying to get paid time off if they show COVID-19 symptoms or are exposed to infected workers. Enormous pressure is placed on workers to continue showing up for work even if they suspect they are sick or could be infected.

“If you can prove you caught COVID in the plant you will get paid 80 hours, but that will never happen. Some get paid three days when they are sent out for testing, or just take two weeks unemployment,” one worker noted.

“Had a friend on the line who wasn’t feeling well and went to medical with no taste and smell ... they sent him back to the line. He went after work, got tested and tested positive for COVID!!! Medical is conspiring with GM to cover up positive cases in the plant...”

Another posted, “Having experienced the medical merry-go-round for 2 weeks I know what you are saying ... I remember if they told you to quarantine they would pay you to up to two weeks to stay home. The reasoning was they didn’t want to discourage people from reporting symptoms and coming to work sick and causing the virus to spread, now that might have been true at the beginning but I can assure you it is not the case anymore.”

Another worker described the daily life-and-death choices facing workers who have serious health issues. “This all pisses me off. I had a kidney transplant 3 years ago and my immune system is compromised being around lord only knows who has COVID. Where is the transparency here? Are our lives not worth it? Are any of these trucks worth any of our brothers and sisters dying because GM and medical cannot be forthcoming with us? This is crazy... we should all demand answers. We should all be given legitimate answers or solutions not this BS about its all ‘OUTSIDE THE PLANT’ We are not idiots!”

Anger at the UAW is boiling over, which has said absolutely nothing as cases explode inside the plant. One worker posted, “Why is our union leadership not doing anything about this? I have not seen any communication from the union about any of this. This is just crazy!”

Reflecting on the situation, a veteran Fort Wayne GM worker, who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWs, “It seems to be getting crazier by the day. Employees have to work if they want income to provide for their families and they know at any moment they may

catch a deadly disease that the employer pretty much ignores. They are doing the minimal they have to and at the same time downplaying it, saying every case has been contracted outside when everyone knows that’s a lie.

“Above all there is no communication and representation from the union ... Their lack of representation and leadership only makes it worse, with the workers knowing they are on their own.”

The *Autoworker Newsletter* urges Fort Wayne GM workers to build a rank-and-file safety committee, independent of the UAW, at your plant and to join the growing national network of safety committees, which have been established at assembly and auto parts plants in Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Missouri and Illinois. Only the independent intervention and initiative of workers can halt the deadly spread of the virus caused by the reckless policies of the corporations and their bought-and-paid-for unions.

In contrast to the UAW, rank-and-file safety committees are democratic organizations of struggle run by the workers themselves. The critical need is for full information and the establishment of lines of communications between workers in different plants and industries to fight for the shutdown of all nonessential production and full compensation for workers until the pandemic is contained.

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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