

New surge of COVID-19 cases at GM Fort Wayne amid reports of expanding outbreaks at other factories

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Management reports provided to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* by workers indicate a new surge of COVID-19 cases at the General Motors Fort Wayne Assembly Plant (FWA) in the wake of the Thanksgiving holiday.

There have been 21 new cases at FWA since the weekend, continuing a trend of multiple daily infections at the light truck plant in northeast Indiana. Despite all evidence, GM insists there is no transmission of the virus in the plant and refuses to pay workers who have to stay home after testing positive.

The catastrophic situation facing workers—with daily cases nearing 200,000, daily deaths closing in on 3,000, and hospitals in city after city running short of staff and beds—has been met with near-total silence by the United Auto Workers (UAW). All talk about a “safe reopening” and workers’ health being the “top priority” has been dropped in the mad pursuit of profit.

In response, workers are increasingly organizing independently of the pro-corporate UAW and demanding emergency action to stop the spread of the virus and save lives. The *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party have helped workers initiate a network of rank-and-file safety committees to fight for a comprehensive program to meet the threat posed by COVID-19, including a halt to non-essential production and full compensation for lost work time until a vaccine becomes widely available.

According to a management memo, there were 13 positive COVID-19 cases at FWA on Monday alone, including five on the second-shift trim crew. Yet management absurdly claimed “GM medical has completed contact tracing and no employees are required to self isolate.” This means scores of potentially infected workers will be forced to report to work, inevitably

passing on the deadly disease to coworkers.

Allen County, where Fort Wayne is located, had 408 new cases Tuesday, bringing the countywide total to 20,668. The county continues to be one of the centers of virus spread in Indiana, with a total of 338 deaths. Studies have documented the role of large industrial facilities such as meatpacking plants and auto factories as vectors of virus transmission.

“The fact is, going to work at GM is dangerous,” a second-tier worker at FWA told the *Autoworker Newsletter*.

“They aren’t following contact tracking, they aren’t doing all they can do and they are lying” about the spread of the virus in the plant, the worker continued.

The worker explained that employees had contracted COVID-19, but their contacts were never followed up by GM: “The three people I gave names to medical for contact tracing were never contacted. The group leader had a list with their names on it and he was supposed to put them out, but chose not to because a whole team of people just went out. He couldn’t afford to lose any more people.

“I reported to the health department that GM was not following the federal guidelines, but so far nothing has been done. During my time off I was contacted by four different nurses in medical and the doctor asking me the same questions, trying to get me to say I went somewhere other than work.”

GM and other auto companies are relying heavily on the use of temporary part-time workers, who are little more than industrial slaves, in order maintain production since increasing numbers of workers have taken medical leave. GM is hiring 200 more temps at FWA to work over the upcoming Christmas holidays, according to a local press report. These workers make the starvation wage of \$16.67

an hour with virtually no benefits.

Meanwhile, GM has stated that although it is preparing plans for the arrival of the coronavirus vaccine, autoworkers will have to wait to get vaccinated because “GM employees are not considered essential workers, according to current criteria.”

Workers will no doubt reply to this statement that they are not essential: “Then why are we being forced to work around the clock when the pandemic is worse than ever?” Clearly, autoworkers’ lives are not “essential” in the eyes of GM.

The FWA worker said, “I am glad to have a job, but I should not be forced into this choice. We need to speak out. Nothing will change unless everyone stands together.

“Your articles are doing nothing but telling the truth. What has the UAW done to protect us? Nothing. They are a bunch of yes men. These [UAW] chairmen are all friends with management. They are making six figures; their future is set. They don’t care about us. Why should I pay someone to represent me who doesn’t represent me?”

Similar stories of surging cases are filtering out of other US auto plants. A worker at GM’s Wentzville Assembly near St. Louis in Missouri said that she had been told there were 21 new cases in the week leading up to Thursday. “It’s reckless,” she said, referring to the continued operation of the plant while cases spike in the area. “They don’t seem to care about us. They need to shut down for 14 days.”

The UAW is completely indifferent to the risks workers were facing, she said. “Somebody said did you talk to your [union] committeeman. But for what? They know this is happening. I don’t want to talk to management, I don’t want to talk to the union, I wanted to talk to you [the *Autoworker Newsletter*].”

A worker at the GM Arlington, Texas, assembly plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “The numbers just aren’t adding up. There is so much corruption by GM in everything they are doing. We are the workers who make the profit for GM, but we are not considered important. This specifically shows in relation to COVID. They are not doing all they can. The quarantine procedures are not enough to keep us safe.

“If they determine that you did not get COVID at the plant, then you’re on your own. Out of the plant means you don’t get money from GM when you are off. People are supposed to call in if they are exposed to someone in their family, but they do not get compensation.”

Similar conditions exist at the plants of other Detroit automakers. In an effort at damage control, UAW Local

862 announced the opening of a testing facility at its union hall in Louisville, Kentucky, for autoworkers and retirees. There are 13,500 active UAW employees at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant and Louisville Assembly.

Fiat Chrysler has enforced a policy of refusing to report positive COVID-19 cases, falsely invoking personal privacy concerns. Workers are finding out about infections only through word of mouth and workers self-disclosing on social media that they tested positive. The recent death of a temporary worker at the FCA Warren Truck plant outside Detroit was not reported by either the UAW or FCA management. According to the limited information available, it was the fifth death from COVID-19 at the plant.

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Tipton, Indiana transmission plant said, “I honestly believe [UAW President] Rory Gamble and the company care nothing about any workers. We endanger ourselves and our families, and it comes down to the fact that people are scared to report if they don’t feel good [because] they screw us out of our pay when we have been out over COVID-19.

“I personally was forced out because myself and numerous other workers were exposed by our team leader. I’m still fighting to get paid for the days I was forced out.”

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Jeep complex in Toledo, Ohio told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “If you go out for exposure, and have no symptoms, HR is telling people they can come back without taking a test. HR told one of my teammates that if you test positive, they don’t want you to tell anyone, and that if you are cleared for having no symptoms, you are allowed to come back without getting a negative test.

“Meanwhile our entire union committee is currently out for exposure, but they didn’t tell anyone who went into the committee room and may have been exposed.”

The Autoworker Newsletter urges workers to join the fight to build a rank-and-file safety committee where you work and to tell us about conditions at your plant. Contact us today.



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