

Seeking to stave off demands for industry shutdown, UAW to host COVID-19 testing site in Louisville, Kentucky

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8 December 2020

Facing rising anger and growing demands from workers for an industry shutdown to control the pandemic, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 862 announced last week that it would begin offering testing for COVID-19 at its union hall. Local 862 covers workers at Ford's two massive factories in Louisville, Kentucky—the Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) and Louisville Assembly Plant (LAP)—which together employ 13,500.

As in other Midwestern states, the coronavirus has been surging out of control throughout Kentucky in recent weeks. Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, a Democrat, announced Saturday that the state had reported its largest number of positive tests last week. Neighboring Indiana, from which many workers in Louisville commute, has also experienced an explosive growth in cases, straining hospital ICU bed and staffing capacities to their limits.

While the UAW has almost universally blacked out the number of cases in the plants, workers reported to the WSWs that they were told that there had been 479 COVID-19 cases at KTP so far this year. It is unclear how many cases there have been at LAP, although Local 862 President Todd Dunn admitted to the *Detroit Free Press* that there were currently 25 workers out from that plant due to the virus, stating, “We’re seeing a definite increase in cases across the community.”

In a move that reveals where autoworkers rank according to the UAW, Local 862 officials and their families are first in line to be tested at the hall. There was no COVID-19 case information provided by the local on how many union officials have been infected, but a worker told the WSWs, “We hardly see union officials on the shop floor.” As with other UAW locals

looking both to protect their own necks and avoid facing the outrage of workers, Local 862 officials canceled the membership meeting at the union hall last month and for December.

Testing at the hall will open up to current and retired workers and their families starting Wednesday, Dec. 9, and will only be available 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. With a limit of only 500 tests per day, out of a total 20,000 workers eligible to receive them, the capacity is grossly inadequate and a far cry from the regular, universal testing needed in order to accurately gauge the full extent of the virus in the plant, especially under conditions of rampant community transmission.

Other testing sites managed by Bluewater Diagnostic Laboratory, the company the UAW has contracted with, have been overwhelmed with demand, as diagnostic labs around the country continue to be inundated as the pandemic surges. “In my lifetime, I’ve never seen anything like this,” Jennifer Bolus, a managing partner at the lab, told the *Free Press*. “People are frantic. One of our testing sites—and it’s like this at all of them—we don’t open until 9 a.m. People start getting in line at 6 a.m.”

Revealingly, Local 862 President Dunn told the *Free Press* that testing at the union hall would save the company on lost work time, since workers who have been exposed or are experiencing symptoms increasingly face delays while self-isolating and awaiting their results. In other words, as with every move by the UAW over the last 40 years, its primary consideration is to boost production and ensure the continued flow of profits to their corporate “partners.”

In June, Local UAW 862 officials took workers to task for taking leaves of absence over safety concerns,

threatening job losses if Ford's production quotas weren't filled. In August, the WSWS reported on an outbreak of 32 cases at KTP, pointing to the erosion of safety measures previously trumpeted by the UAW, which subsequently have been almost entirely cast aside.

Under close watch by Wall Street investors, new Ford CEO Jim Farley is leaving nothing to chance with the release of the 2021 F-150 pickup and the Super Duty trucks, which are the linchpin of profits for the company. In remarks to the media Ford's vice president of North American manufacturing, John Savonna, spoke to the high demand for the vehicles produced at the Louisville plants, which he said were "working around the clock." Ford reported third-quarter earnings of \$3.6 billion, which was double that of the same period last year. Savonna added that KTP was "one of our highest producing plants."

A worker at KTP told the WSWS that concerns about the spread of the virus in the plant were growing. "On a recent shift we had 15 people walk out of the plant to get tested, so nothing has slowed in the last month, and we're not happy." Shutdowns and deep-cleaning following cases have been dispensed with, they added. "They are supposed to shut down and clean the area where there is a COVID-19 case, but they are not doing that." Voicing the widespread anger felt by workers over the UAW's indifference, they said, "Our building chairman is doing nothing to help."

Another KTP worker spoke about the dangerous conditions they were facing at the plant. "I came down with COVID-19 this past summer and I don't know from where, and we were told last week that there were 479 COVID-19 cases at the plant so far this year." They added, "A family member of mine, who was likely infected from me, has suffered terribly from most all of the symptoms for over two weeks."

Workers are being kept in the dark about new cases, they said. "They haven't been telling us if someone gets sick near their area of the plant, and I know this because I called some of my coworkers to tell them when I was out with COVID."

"The union didn't get in touch with me for over a week and a half into my sickness, and I hadn't received my two weeks of sick pay until this last month."

The worker forcefully stated, "I wish they would follow CDC guidelines and tell us when someone

becomes sick with COVID, we have a right to know, so there could be proper cleaning, contact tracing, and screening. Everyone is scared of becoming sick and bringing it home."

The worker said they supported a rank-and-file safety committee independent of the UAW being organized at the plant, similar to those formed by workers at plants such as the Faurecia Gladstone auto parts plant in Columbus, Indiana, and Fiat Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly near Detroit. Workers have initiated such committees at a growing number of auto plants, along with teachers facing deadly conditions at schools, in order to fight for measures to bring the pandemic under control and ensure income and job security for workers.

To learn more about organizing a rank-and-file safety committee at KTP, LAP, or wherever you work, or to report on conditions at your workplace, contact autoworkers@wsws.org today.



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