

Detroit Free Press breaks silence on Fiat Chrysler COVID-19 deaths in effort at damage control

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The statements by representatives for both Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and the United Auto Workers in Wednesday's *Detroit Free Press* make clear their determination to keep employees at their stations no matter the cost in lives and health. Also beyond doubt is the urgent need for autoworkers to organize their own rank-and-file safety committees completely independent of these corporate institutions in order to fight for their lives and their own class interests.

With workers widely sharing articles by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* in recent days revealing the deaths of workers from COVID-19 at Detroit-area auto plants, the company, the UAW, and the corporate media evidently felt they could no longer keep silent and had to shift into damage control.

Chrysler management cynically declared in its statement to the *Free Press*, "FCA was saddened to learn of the recent deaths of two employees from our Warren Truck Assembly Plant and one employee from our Sterling Heights Assembly Plant. Based on our aggressive contact tracing protocols, we believe that these positive cases did not come from exposure inside the plants. In fact, one of the Warren Truck employees had not been in the plant since June when it shut down for retooling."

After reading the *Free Press* report, a worker from Warren Truck told the WSWS, "It's amazing that the company is allowed to just say that they 'know' that the so-called safety protocols that they have in place are working, when they cannot prove that fact in any way, shape, form. They have no proof, and no one with authority is asking them for it either. The so-called safety measures are clearly just for show."

He added that the latest worker to die, Stephanie

Weems, was out for months, and it was only after she came back that she contracted the virus.

On the part of the UAW—which has colluded with the company for weeks in covering up the recent deaths—spokesman Brian Rothenberg told the *Free Press*, "Our thoughts are with the families and coworkers during this very difficult time. It's important that we all redouble our efforts to make sure (that) we, our families and our co-workers follow protocols both at the worksite and outside of work."

In other words, infections in the plant are solely the result of workers not "following protocols" in their daily lives. If workers die from COVID-19, says the UAW, it's their own fault—not the fault of the companies and union officials who have herded workers back into the plants and tossed aside any meaningful safety measures in the profit-mad rush to return to full production.

An organization making such comments, if there were any lingering questions remaining about it, is in reality an enforcer for the companies, venomously hostile to the workers it claims to represent and well beyond reform.

Rothenberg's statement is also significant because it implicitly acknowledges, after the UAW has denounced the *World Socialist Web Site* as "fake news" and not to be trusted by autoworkers, that what the WSWS has published about the spread of the disease was true all along. Rothenberg's statement also appears to be the first public acknowledgement by the International UAW of any COVID-related autoworker deaths in the recent period. The statement has not, as of this writing, been posted to the UAW's website.

After months of silence, the *Free Press* was forced to

publish their minimal report on the health disaster at FCA because they and the companies know conditions are creating a powder keg of anger among workers. In an uncommon acknowledgement, the article states: “The World Socialist Web Site reported earlier on the deaths.”

The WSWS has been reporting on the homicidal safety conditions during the entire pandemic. Since the reopening of the plants in May, the WSWS has posted some 50 articles on the spread of the COVID-19 virus in FCA facilities in the Detroit region alone. Despite company threats of termination for making public information on the raging virus, workers have continued to reach out to the WSWS to report their appalling working conditions, seeing it as the only publication which has consistently provided them with a voice and told the truth about the situation in the plants.

Several employees who were infected, and in some cases re-infected, at the FCA manufacturing facilities have contacted the WSWS in recent days. They related that on the shop floor, officials are denying any possibility that their infections were contracted inside the plant, much to the workers’ frustration and anger. There were incidents where workers, who tested positive and were quarantined until testing negative, have come back and gotten re-exposed to the virus.

One Warren Truck worker said, “If someone is infected, they never inform us so we can go out and get tested. We only hear about it when one worker talks to another worker. My family has underlying conditions. My sister is waiting for a heart. I have another sister who is waiting for a kidney.

“Social distancing is almost impossible. You wouldn’t get anything done. You have to work side by side. You use the same equipment, the same ink pens. You try to keep wiping the rail, but everybody touches it.”

They rejected FCA’s claim of “aggressive contact tracing,” saying, “They never do that. A coworker’s mother died of COVID. Another worker had it. We were never informed so we could get tested. They blame it on HIPAA [the Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act], but I know what HIPAA is and that’s just an excuse.”

A worker from FCA’s Sterling Heights Assembly who recently tested positive said, “This is B.S. for

management to say it was contracted outside the plant. It’s in the plant because they’re not cleaning but 10 minutes out of 10 to 12 hours a shift. It’s so sad to hear them blame the workers for getting it. More cases are developing. I hear that there are positive people who are afraid to test because they need the money.

“I was denied workers comp [compensation] even though I tested positive and was out for two weeks. They claimed that I did not contract it in the plant. I know at least about a half dozen others who are in the same boat.”

At least as far back as August, workers have told the WSWS that FCA management has been forcing workers to stay on the job after they have tested positive.

The pandemic is on the verge of reaching horrific new dimensions, with daily cases, hospitalizations and deaths surging to new records. To prevent tens of thousands or more from dying, urgent action is required by workers.

Rank-and-file safety committees must be expanded in every plant to prepare the actions needed to save lives, including strikes and walkouts. The plants must be shut down, and employees fully compensated for lost wages while the coronavirus is brought under control, with the massive corporate bailouts made in March through the CARES Act redirected to meet the needs of the working population.

To learn more about joining or organizing a rank-and-file committee or to share comments about the situation at your plant, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact