Auto companies' stocks rise as workers die from COVID-19

Shannon Jones
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With COVID-19 cases surging in auto plants, Wall Street is demanding car companies increase production to restock depleted dealer inventories. At the same time, anger among workers is growing over the mounting toll of sickness and death and the efforts of the United Auto Workers and management to suppress opposition to unsafe conditions.

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, manufacturing facilities, including auto plants, continue to be major vectors of virus transmission in the state. For the week ending Dec. 3 the state's health department reported 40 new outbreaks at manufacturing and construction sites, including 12 in the greater Detroit area and another four at agricultural and food processing worksites. These are in addition to 112 ongoing outbreaks identified in manufacturing and construction sites.

As the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has reported, there have been three recent COVID-19-related deaths of workers at Detroit-area Fiat Chrysler plants, including one death at Sterling Heights Assembly (SHAP) and two at Warren Truck. On Monday, 53-year-old John Stamper, who worked at the Faurecia auto parts plant in Saline, Michigan, died of a COVID-related heart attack.

On Wednesday, the Detroit Free Press broke its silence on the deaths at Warren Truck and SHAP and was compelled to acknowledge the role of the WSWS in bringing the deaths to light. At the same time, the newspaper promoted the false narrative peddled by FCA and the UAW that there is no spread of the virus in the plants, and that workers are essentially at fault for contracting the disease.

Despite the growing number of deaths, auto sales and car company profits are booming. Stock rating firm Zack's Equity Research has upgraded Fiat Chrysler stock to "strong buy," meaning that the company has a high likelihood of producing profits well above market estimates. Over the last three months the estimate for FCA has increased 158 percent. The Dodge Ram, produced at SHAP and Warren Truck, is one of FCA's most profitable vehicles.

Fiat Chrysler stock prices have been rising steadily since May, and now are slightly above pre-pandemic levels. The same is true for rivals Ford and General Motors.

RJ, a worker at the FCA Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) in Detroit, told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, "It is not about human life, it is about profit. When you put profit before human life, that means you care more about money than you do people. If you were worried about coronavirus you wouldn't have people here seven days a week. Most plants are running 10–12 hour shifts."

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Tipton, Indiana, transmission plant said, "It's pretty evident that the workers are being used like sheep and treated like farm animals and not the great men and women who have carried Fiat Chrysler for years."

Outbreaks are not limited to the Detroit automakers. According to Facebook posts by workers there is an outbreak at Nissan's Smyrna, Tennessee, plant. One worker wrote, "Management at Smyrna is flailing trying to get the COVID numbers under control. They think videos are going to help it.

"They are flailing, numbers are going up and it's getting to the point that we are going to have more people out with COVID than we have working."

Meanwhile, investors are demanding that auto production be ramped up even further. "Factories have to get back to work," said Ally Financial CEO Jeffrey Brown, referring to depleted inventory levels. Ally

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Financial is a Detroit-based company that performs auto lending and other banking services. Sales of new and used cars have been booming due to low interest rates.

Auto companies are currently running at near pre-pandemic levels despite a rising number of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Michigan, the home base of FCA, Ford and General Motors, is experiencing record numbers of new COVID-19 cases and deaths. For December the state has seen a daily death toll in excess of 100 and more than 5,000 confirmed cases each day. Measures imposed by Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to supposedly contain the pandemic specifically exclude manufacturing facilities and K-8 schools, major centers of disease transmission.

Workers have reported that management in some cases is telling workers infected with COVID-19 not to share the information with coworkers. Where workers are confirmed to have COVID-19, management refuses to acknowledge in-plant transmission. In some cases this has resulted in management refusing to grant sick workers paid leave to recover.

RJ said, “They are not following the guidelines. The numbers are not going down, if anything they are doubling.” Remarking on management’s claim that COVID-19 is not spreading inside the plants, she added, “They know it’s not true. They are not allowing us to clean as we once did. There is lukewarm water in bathrooms all-year round.

“When you are in an environment where there are a lot of people, you can only social distance so far. The jobs are set up so that it is like you are piggy-backing on one another.” For those who are sick or in quarantine, she said, “The big corporations aren’t going to pay you to be off, unless you use your vacation.”

A leaked management memo at JNAP revealed that as of Oct. 5 there had been 59 confirmed COVID-19 cases at the plant and two deaths. Fiat Chrysler management provides the UAW with details on the number of infections, but these numbers are kept hidden from workers.

The Tipton transmission worker said, “In [UAW President] Rory Gamble you see a man can talk a game one way, but when Rory is in the eyes of the company he’s a completely different person who cares more about the shareholders than the lives of the workers and their families.

“The union is virtually non-existent inside the plant and the union stewards are on the side of the company. It’s truly unbelievable how little the union is about the people and more about money period. They help management single out certain people who do not play their games. They feel the best way to fix a problem with union workers is to just get them fired and that’s one less person who can expose everything that’s actually going on in the plant.”

The JNAP worker, RJ, said, “The UAW is not saying anything because they don’t care. They were bought and sold years go. All they do is support their friends and families. None of us can stand on the sidelines. We have to act to save lives.”

She continued, “Wall Street and Washington are in it for the rich. I have heard that some people who get sick, their companies are not even paying for coronavirus. This is a world disaster, it is not natural causes. I just want to stay alive. We have to draw the line somewhere.

“People have to fight with their voice and their knowledge. Michigan is being hit hard just like the South. When they opened back up, they did not use the precautions they should have.”

In reference to the campaign by the *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party to build rank-and-file safety committees, she added, “You should continue to advocate and continue to keep getting people involved. I am behind this 100 percent.”

To get more information about building a rank-and-file safety committee in your plant, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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