

At least five autoworkers test positive for COVID-19 at Windsor, Ontario Fiat-Chrysler plant

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At least five cases of COVID-19 were announced last week at the Fiat-Chrysler Windsor Assembly Plant in Ontario, just across the border from Detroit, after a complaint by an employee was registered with the provincial Ministry of Labour. The ministry is still investigating the matter and has released no further information. The ministry did not notify the regional health authority about the complaint when it was initially received.

The autoworker who filed the complaint acted due to widespread concern on the shop floor that FCA management has been concealing reports about infections from the 4,500-strong workforce. Despite the silence in early December by both the company and Unifor officials on infections, workers shared information among themselves about the growing danger.

The horrific conditions in the Canadian auto plants is expressed most graphically by a series of unexplained worker deaths over recent months. Alfred Szramek, a well-respected worker at the Brampton Assembly Plant, died suddenly during his shift earlier this month. As of this writing, no cause of death has been officially announced.

“This is so scary... We are working 6 days a week,” a Brampton worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. “Saturday is mandatory?! Over the past 3 months we have had so many of our employees die of heart attacks, young people! Seemingly healthy until they are found dead. Last man that died was an athlete, ran marathons and last Friday he was found in our weld shop, dead! It’s my personal opinion that Covid-19 is affecting people in all different ways not only influenza symptoms. Greedy corporations are killing off our members! Makes me so angry.”

Pressed by workers for more information on outbreaks at Windsor Assembly, Unifor Local 444 President Dave

Cassidy posted a video on December 9 where he stated, “I’m not sure what these numbers are in our area and what that means moving forward but as I said earlier we are really monitoring close to see what happens from here.”

For their part, FCA last week tried to downplay the rise of cases in the assembly plant. “We know these protocols—including onsite temperature check, daily health questionnaire, mandatory use of masks and safety glasses, social distancing, and continual cleaning and disinfecting—are working to prevent the spread and transmission of the virus when employees are at work. In addition, we are encouraging our employees to follow these same protocols when out and about to protect not only themselves, but their colleagues, families and communities,” claimed the automaker.

This is a lie. Canadian FCA workers in contact with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* have described deteriorating working conditions at the Windsor and also the Brampton assembly operations. Overcrowded and poorly maintained washrooms, the impossibility of maintaining proper social distancing on the line and bottlenecks at plant entry points are common complaints.

The fact is that both Unifor and the auto bosses are in full agreement that the plants must remain open in order to pump out steady profits for the corporate shareholders at the expense of the health and safety of autoworkers. The ridiculous justification that autoworkers are “essential workers” is regularly derided by autoworkers on Unifor social media pages.

An exchange on December 9 on the Local 444 Facebook page between a worker and Local 444 President Cassidy clearly shows the union’s subservience to management.

“I was hoping,” wrote the worker, “that the union could

push the company to extend breaks and lunch as before. My understanding was that they stopped the extended breaks because the numbers were heading in the right direction. Now as we've gone from orange, to red, and rocketing towards lockdown, spreading out break times would reduce the number of people in the washrooms at one time." Cassidy responded to this proposal, "We went to corporate and as of now they are not moving on this but I'm going to take it up the chain a bit higher."

In other words, the union has no intention of mobilizing autoworkers against the dangerous conditions in the plant, and submits docilely to whatever management determines is necessary to keep churning out profits for FCA's investors.

Meanwhile, Windsor-Essex County is ending its first week in "full" lockdown due to spiking virus infection rates. The major industrial centers of Hamilton, Peel Region and the Greater Toronto area are also in lockdown. Peel Region is home to the other Fiat-Chrysler assembly plant in Brampton, while FCA's Etobicoke casting facility lies in the Toronto zone.

The Ontario Conservative government's definition of "lockdown" (echoing those of all political parties in Canada) exempts manufacturing operations, which have remained open with virtually no restrictions. In the period prior to the onset of the holiday breaks, schools remained open. Big box stores continue to do business. As Doctor Wajid Ahmed, chief medical officer for the Windsor-Essex Health Unit remarked last week, "(W)e are calling it a lockdown but it's not truly a lockdown. In the first wave of the pandemic, nearly everything was closed and there were few people on the roads."

The ruling class was forced to impose the spring lockdown due to the independent initiative taken by Windsor FCA workers, who stopped work for three consecutive shifts over concerns about the spread of the coronavirus at their plant in March. This quickly spilled over the border when their American counterparts took wildcat job action in auto assembly and parts plants across Michigan and Ohio. Terrified that the militant actions of rank and file autoworkers would quickly spin out of control, the Detroit Three corporate bosses temporarily bowed to a full production shutdown.

Working hand-in-glove with Unifor and the United Auto Workers in the US, FCA, Ford, and General Motors reopened their plants two months later against the advice of the World Health Organization and other medical experts, who recommended regular testing protocols as the linchpin for any production restart. Instead, the

automakers introduced inadequate temperature checks at plant entrances. With the support of the unions, they quickly abandoned all efforts to support social distancing in the plants and refused to provide suitable masks and ensure basic hygiene requirements were met.

During the bargaining round for the Detroit Three's Canadian operations this fall, Unifor included a bland, self-serving statement in each contract that they had "reflected" with company negotiators on their joint efforts to combat the pandemic, while not committing to a single practical measure to keep workers safe. As a result, workers have continued to risk their lives and those of their families and friends for the benefit of the auto corporations' bottom lines and their super-rich investors.

Already rank-and-file safety committees independent of the United Auto Workers have been formed in auto plants throughout the American Midwest. Canadian autoworkers must follow their lead. These committees must demand the shutdown of the auto industry and all other nonessential production with full pay for all workers until the pandemic is brought under control.

Through these committees, workers should also prepare to answer the assault on their jobs and living standards by reaching out to and uniting their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in auto plants in the United States, Mexico and internationally. This must be linked to a political fight for the Detroit Three and other automakers and parts plants to be transformed into publicly-owned utilities under workers' control, so that their production can be organized to fulfill social needs, rather than enriching the millionaire investors.



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