

Death toll rises to 11 at General Motors plant in Silao, Mexico

Andrea Lobo

22 December 2020

Eleven workers at General Motor's Silao complex in the Mexican state of Guanajuato have died of the coronavirus, according to workers at the plant who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. These deaths are the outcome of the reopening of Mexican manufacturing plants by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (or AMLO as he is commonly known) in May, giving a blank check for transnational corporations to sacrifice workers' lives for profits.

However, the death toll at the plant may be even higher. Management at the plant, together with the gangster-ridden union, the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) and health authorities, are concealing the true extent of the virus. GM is also pressuring workers to remain at work even after testing positive. It recently fired Sergio Contreras, with 26 years seniority, after he tested positive at his own expense and quarantined to protect his coworkers.

The most recent victim was José Luis H. from the car body area, whose "sensitive death" on December 19 was reported by the union without indicating the cause. His coworkers confirmed that he had contracted coronavirus.

Just a week earlier, the plant's Human Resources manager Julio Arce, who had overseen the firing of workers for challenging the lack of protections against COVID-19, and who had previously worked as safety manager, also died. "We heard he died here at the plant and was taken out in a plastic bag with a zipper," one worker wrote, adding that Arce had been hospitalized for COVID-19.

"The company doesn't take the necessary measures against this pandemic," Contreras said to the WSWs. "When I got infected inside the plant, medical talked to my team about taking the COVID test, but it was a

questionnaire of whether you have fever, headaches, cough. 'You don't have COVID; get back to your area,' they told everyone."

"For a global corporation like GM," concludes Contreras, "what cost is there really for testing their own employees?"

After the death of Gilberto M. on July 19, Contreras, who was his team leader, asked an HR manager directly if the worker had died from COVID. "No," responded the manager, who explained that the death certificate said "atypical pneumonia," at a time when it was widely reported that COVID-19 fatalities were not being tested.

Outbreaks are underway at other GM plants throughout North America. For example, dozens of new cases have been confirmed in recent weeks at GM in Indiana, which produces the highly profitable Sierra and Silverado trucks that are also produced at Silao. Fort Wayne workers report that GM is using the same tactics in Indiana that it is using in Mexico to browbeat workers into remaining on the job.

Contreras, together with Israel Cervantes, leads a group of rank-and-file workers in the plant named Generating Movement. The group is well-known to autoworkers throughout North America for its courageous opposition to management's attempts to impose speedups and forced overtime at Silao to offset lost production during last year's General Motors strike in the United States. General Motors fired Cervantes and 17 other sympathizers of the group before and after the strike. Since last year, Generating Movement has participated in several online meetings organized by the *World Socialist Web Site* to appeal for support and international unity with their class brothers and sisters in the United States.

Unsafe conditions have long been the norm,

Cervantes told the WSWS. “Workers today begin at about 1,000 pesos a week (US\$50). Since a new system of 12-hour shifts was implemented, there have been many accidents.” Contreras told the WSWS that a coworker lost an eye when assembling dashboards and was never paid the promised compensation.

As hospitals in Guanajuato and across Mexico quickly fill up with coronavirus patients, manufacturing plants are being kept open by the government with the support of the trade unions—the CTM and the so-called “independent” unions alike.

After a wave of wildcat strikes across Europe, Canada and the United States and auto-parts factories in northern Mexico, the North American auto industry was forced to shut down between March and May. AMLO was compelled to close all nonessential production, including manufacturing.

Across Mexico, however, many companies freely violated the lockdown orders, which were left unenforced by AMLO, either remaining open or paying workers only partial compensation during the shutdown.

GM, for instance, paid workers 55 percent of their salaries as a bludgeon to eventually force them back to work. The government, after refusing to provide any relief to those affected by the shutdown, allowed General Motors to be one of the first to reopen by mid-May.

As of Monday, the government had reported 118,202 deaths; however, the government’s own public health experts at the Cenaprece (the Mexican equivalent of the Centers for Disease Control in the United States) forecasted 280,000 excess deaths through the end of 2020.

While reporting 1.32 million cases, the National Institute of Public Health (INSP) found from a random sample that 24.8 percent of the population, or the equivalent of 31 million people, in Mexico have contracted COVID-19.

Almost 80 percent had mild or no symptoms and “could be unknowingly transmitting the virus,” explained INSP director Juan Rivera. “That’s why it’s important to take all precautions.”

Given that 75 percent of Mexicans still have no immunity, Rivera added, “We must not be careless, we must not drop our guard... The vast majority of us are vulnerable to infection.”

In another striking figure, the Health Ministry said the average age of COVID-19 fatalities is 55, compared to over 75 across more developed nations.

The response of the “left” Mexican government to the pandemic has been virtually indistinguishable from the fascistic administrations of Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Instead of implementing new lockdown measures, AMLO has limited himself to warning against social gatherings. Worse, he is encouraging migrants in the US to visit for the holidays and claiming that masks are “not indispensable.”

To prevent mass death, the wealth of the financial oligarchy, which has increased by trillions of dollars in the pandemic due to the policies of the world’s governments and central banks, must be seized to pay for a massive public health program. Schools and universities, together with production that is not essential for the maintenance of human life, must be shut down, with all wages fully guaranteed.

To fight for this program, the *World Socialist Web Site* is helping to build rank-and-file safety committees in factories and workplaces throughout the world to mobilize the independent strength of the working class.

To join or form a rank-and-file safety committee at your plant, contact the World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact