

Shut down the auto industry to save lives until a vaccine is available to all! Full compensation for all workers!

The Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network
23 December 2020

The Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network, composed of autoworkers from plants throughout the United States, calls for an immediate shutdown of the auto industry to halt the spread of the virus, both in the plants and in surrounding communities, and for full compensation to workers.

The beginning of vaccinations makes it all the more necessary to contain the pandemic now and prevent unnecessary deaths and infections. Just as no soldier wants to be the last one shot before a peace treaty, there is no justification for any further deaths to build Jeeps or F-150s while millions of people wait to be vaccinated.

The auto companies, with the full support and collaboration of the United Auto Workers union, have deliberately carried out policies that have exposed hundreds if not thousands of workers to the virus, causing dozens of deaths. At a single factory, Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck Assembly Plant in Detroit, at least six workers have died since the start of the pandemic, and new outbreaks have been occurring throughout the last month.

Evidence shows that large workplaces and construction sites, along with nursing homes and K-12 schools, have been the largest spreaders of the disease in industrial states like Michigan and Illinois, and across the border in Canada and Mexico. Many hospitals cannot take any more patients, with ICUs overflowing and doctors and nurses pushed to their breaking point.

The automakers and the UAW have ignored the most elementary advice by public health experts, including the need to shut down non-essential businesses and activities and carry out mass testing and contact tracing to contain the spread of the virus.

The companies and unions have abandoned the limited safety measures enacted after production restarted in mid-

May. They have used financial hardship to blackmail workers into staying on the job after being exposed, and they have systematically concealed information on the spread of the virus in the plants.

In every country, giant multinational corporations, with the support of national governments, are imposing the same brutal conditions on workers. Therefore, we call for the widest international unity of workers. In particular, we express our support to our brothers and sisters in the auto plants in Mexico and Canada, as well as striking autoworkers at Toyota in India and Kia and General Motors in South Korea. We appeal to autoworkers around the world to contact us and begin laying the foundation for a global collaboration.

While the vaccine is now being distributed to members of Congress, it will be months before it will be widely available for autoworkers. Earlier this month, GM spokesman David Caldwell told the *Detroit Free Press*: "It's important to keep in mind that essential workers and others with specific types of health conditions or elderly will likely be first in line when government health departments establish distribution plans. ... GM employees are *not considered essential workers*, according to current criteria [emphasis added]."

This is entirely true. We know our work is not essential. But this only begs the question: Why are we being forced to work under conditions where 3,000 people are dying every day?

The answer is that our labor is "essential" to fill the pockets of the corporate owners and Wall Street investors, and if we die, they'll just replace us with some other poor sucker. While 1.7 million people have died during the pandemic, including more than 333,000 in the US, the 650 billionaires in the US, including Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Tesla's Elon Musk, and John Tyson, the

meatpacking king, have increased their wealth by over \$1 trillion.

At the same time, the reopening of manufacturing and other industries has produced huge profits for the major corporations. Last quarter, Fiat Chrysler made \$1.5 billion in profits, Ford made \$2.4 billion and GM made \$4 billion.

The sacrifice of human life for profit has the full backing of the UAW. In a recent interview with *Automotive News*, UAW President Rory Gamble said, “It’s been proven the automotive industry is very essential *to the economy* [emphasis added] of this country. ... I totally agree health care workers should get it first, but as this thing comes online in waves, we need to consider labor in this country that goes to work every day and fights in fear of this virus to keep this country moving.” In other words, Gamble and the UAW support keeping plants open while workers continue to become infected and die before they can get vaccinated.

The entire political establishment wants to keep us pumping out vehicles, no matter how many of us get sick and die. Not only Trump, whose advisors called for infecting as many people as possible, but Joe Biden and congressional Democrats have rejected all calls for new shutdowns of workplaces and schools. Biden muzzled Dr. Michael Osterholm, a member of his COVID-19 advisory board, after the famous epidemiologist called for a national lockdown with wages guaranteed by the federal government.

Biden has said the “darkest days” of the virus are ahead, with another 250,000 to die before the vaccine is widely available, but he has proposed no emergency measures because the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are tools of Wall Street and the pandemic profiteers.

While handing over trillions to the major banks and corporations this year, the Democrats and Republicans in Washington have now signed a pandemic relief act that provides an insulting \$600 check for millions who are facing hunger, evictions and destitution. The aim of that is to starve workers back into infected factories.

The sheer indifference of the ruling class to mass suffering is an indictment of the capitalist system itself. More than 150 years after the Civil War, America is once again, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, a “house divided”—not between slave and free states, but between the capitalists and the working class.

The working class must be the “adults in the room” and take a stand for science and human life. We endorse the demands in the statement of the Socialist Equality Party

that was published on December 16, “For emergency action to save lives! Close schools and shut down nonessential production! Full compensation for workers!”

These demands include:

- The immediate shutdown of nonessential production
- The closure of all schools and universities to in-person instruction
- Full compensation for workers during the shutdown, including the immediate reinstatement of the \$600-per-week supplemental unemployment benefits.

The grotesque pandemic profiteering by the wealthy must be brought to an end. The trillions hoarded during the pandemic by the billionaires must be seized in order to compensate workers and provide relief for small businesses during a national shutdown. It must also be used to pay for a massive public health program, rapidly increasing hospital capacity and building the infrastructure to create and distribute enough vaccines for every human being on the planet, free of charge.

The capitalist class will never agree to such demands willingly, and all appeals to reason and humanity will fall on deaf ears. Therefore, workers must organize themselves as an independent force, opposing both management and their paid stooges in the UAW, in order to make preparations for a political general strike and enforce these demands.

Our network of rank-and-file safety committees is working to establish connections and communicate across different plants, industries, and national borders, to discuss and fight for a joint program of action to stop the homicidal policies of herd immunity being pursued by the entire capitalist class.

We have already founded rank-and-file safety committees at several major FCA and Ford assembly plants, and we note with pride the founding this month of a committee by parts workers at Faurecia Saline. We also urge Ventra parts workers in Sandusky, Ohio, as well as GM workers to contact us to begin setting up their own committees at their factories. The Rank-and-File Safety Network must be expanded, with committees organized in every plant. Now is the time to stand together!

For more information and to join or build a committee at your plant, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact