

Worker opposition grows as US manufacturers ramp up production amid pandemic upsurge

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According to recent reports, US manufacturing output has increased for seven consecutive months and is now close to pre-pandemic levels, despite an uncontrolled and continuing increase of COVID-19 infections and deaths. The US Federal Reserve reports that manufacturing output is now just five percent below the level of February, even as infections spike and the death toll from COVID-19 nears 350,000, the highest number in the world.

Leading the resurgence in production has been the auto industry, which saw a 5.3 percent increase in output in November. According to a Ford Motor spokesman, the auto company is now operating at 98 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

Manufacturing profits, again led by the auto industry, are approaching pre-pandemic highs. Auto company stock prices have also rebounded, rising steadily since May and beating analysts' expectations.

The corporations and both big business parties have used economic blackmail to keep workers on the job. While handing trillions to Wall Street, the airlines, major hospital chains and other giant corporations, Congress voted to provide a pittance to tens of millions of workers who are facing levels of evictions, hunger and poverty not seen since the Great Depression.

Despite this there are growing signs of opposition to the sacrifice of workers' lives for corporate profit. Last week, a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order to block a strike by 8,000 Union Pacific Railroad (UP) workers, which was scheduled to start Monday, over the lack of COVID protections and pay for quarantined workers. Hundreds of UP and other railway workers have been infected and at least 10 have died. In riding roughshod over the right to strike, the judge absurdly declared that the pandemic was not "a work-specific safety concern" for the Union Pacific workers.

Among teachers and education workers, there is enormous opposition to the homicidal campaign to restart in-person

schooling in Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit and other major urban areas over the next few weeks. In a major escalation of this campaign, President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to reopen all schools by the end of April, with the fulsome support of the unions. Growing numbers of educators are building independent rank-and-file safety committees across the US, including in California, New York, Michigan, Texas and other states, to oppose these policies and fight for the full funding of remote learning and resources to enable parents to stay home with their kids.

An attempt by Fiat Chrysler management to address the COVID-related manpower shortage at its Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) outside Detroit by establishing a 12-hour, seven-day work schedule for skilled trades, with the support of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, had to be scrapped in the face of an outpouring of opposition.

Workers at a number of auto and auto parts plants, including SHAP, have organized rank and file safety committees to oppose the union-management cover-up of infections and deaths and protect workers' lives. These committees, formed with the support of the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*, are spearheading the call for the shutdown of nonessential production until the pandemic is contained.

The attitude of workers to the UAW was expressed in a comment received by the *Autoworker Newsletter* from the FCA Tipton, Indiana transmission plant. "Transmissions in the Chrysler plants in Indiana are not a necessity and it's truly unbelievable how little [UAW President] Rory Gamble and his associates care about anyone but themselves" the worker wrote. "They live the life of the rich and it truly shows how little we the workers actually mean to these people, who have done absolutely nothing to protect the union workers in Indiana."

The drive to keep factories open during the pandemic, including nonessential production such as auto, is being spearheaded by a nonstop disinformation effort by the

corporations, the unions and the media, which is aimed at covering up the health risks of operating plants during the pandemic. This has included covering up the number and location of infections and blocking any reports on worker deaths. Meanwhile, workers who speak out against these conditions face intimidations and threats.

Clear scientific evidence points to the danger to public health posed by the operation of factories, as well as schools, in the midst of the pandemic. A study published this month by *Science* found that closing schools reduced the spread of COVID-19 by 38 percent, while closure of nonessential face-to-face business operations reduced spread by 18 percent.

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, there were seven workplace-related outbreaks of COVID-19 in the state, a center of auto manufacturing, for the week ending December 23. Another seven outbreaks were reported at K-12 schools.

A new report from the US Department of Agriculture, cited by Bloomberg News, found that infections in the 56 mostly rural counties dependent on the meatpacking industry were running as much as 10 times the rate of other rural US counties last April, and seven times the rate in May. Over the past week, Bloomberg noted, North Dakota, South Dakota and Iowa reported some of the highest death rates when scaled for population.

While management and the unions have done everything possible to cover up the spread of the virus in the plants, what is known is alarming. The United Food and Commercial Workers admitted that at least 19,800 meatpacking workers have been infected or exposed and 128 have died of COVID-19.

At least 20,000 Amazon workers have been infected, with new outbreaks forcing the closure of a New Jersey warehouse last week and growing anger in warehouses near Toronto, Canada, where more than 400 workers have tested positive. “There is no social distancing, there is no sanitation,” one worker told the *National Post*. “Many of them, 99 per cent of them, are scared of working there, but they have no choice.”

At least three Detroit-area Fiat Chrysler workers have died of COVID-19 since the restart of auto production in May, and there are reports of other autoworker deaths related to COVID-19. Infections are being reported daily at auto plants across the country. The latest autoworker to succumb to the virus was Michael Fraser, a contract worker at the Ford Kansas City Assembly Plant.

Despite all of this, auto management, with the support of the UAW, claims auto plants are pristine and virus-free. They have tried to maintain this fiction by hiding the number and location of cases. Management has even denied financial support to workers who contract COVID-19, claiming they

must have contracted the infection outside the plant.

In response to these farcical claims, one Fort Wayne GM worker recently noted sarcastically on Facebook, “This is the safest place to be because no one gets COVID at GM.”

UAW President Rory Gamble in a statement quoted by the Associated Press asserted that reports of the danger of COVID-19 spreading in the plants were due to “misinformation,” an oblique reference to the WSWS, which has carried regular reports on outbreaks of the disease in auto factories.

“They need to have a complete understanding that we’re doing everything we can to keep them safe,” Gamble lyingly asserted. He added that workers “have a right to be afraid,” without adding that UAW insists they have no right to halt production and interrupt the flow of profit to save their own lives.

But this is exactly what is needed. Emergency measures are needed now or hundreds of thousands of additional lives may be lost. These include the shutdown of schools and all nonessential production. Workers in the affected industries as well as small businesses must receive full compensation for lost wages and business income.

This requires that workers take independent action in opposition to the unions and the big business politicians in the Democratic and Republican parties. The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS call for the building of emergency action committees to mobilize the power of the working class, including the preparation of a political general strike to shut down nonessential production and schools and guarantee full compensation.

The working class must insist that the defense of human lives takes precedence over the mad drive for the accumulation of private profit. The fight for this requires a new leadership and perspective based on the international unity of the working class and the socialist reorganization of economic and political life. We urge workers to join the Socialist Equality Party to take up this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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