

COVID-19 spreads at Allison Transmission auto parts plant in Indiana

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New cases of COVID-19 have been accelerating in recent weeks at Allison Transmission in Indianapolis, Indiana, according to data shared by workers with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.

Allison Transmission Inc. is a large manufacturer of commercial automatic transmissions and has been one of only a handful of companies in the auto industry to report the number of cases among employees. Owned by General Motors for most of the 20th century, Allison was sold by the automaker to private equity firms in the late 2000s, one of a number of formerly in-house suppliers to be spun off as part of the wave of cost-cutting and restructuring in the auto industry over the last 40 years.

“We had 20 cases last week, and 14 just on Monday alone,” one worker told the WWS, reporting for the week of December 14. This was followed up by 19 cases before the end of the year, totaling 135 cases for 2020.

In the Indianapolis area, Allison has both its corporate headquarters and a manufacturing plant where tank and truck transmissions are built. Within these two sites there are roughly 3,200 employees, including 1,500 hourly and 1,700 salaried. According to text messages sent by the company to workers in early October, 37 hourly employees in the plant had tested positive while 14 salary and two security guards tested positive.

“Most of the cases now seem to be in the offices,” the worker said, “because [office] workers are working on top of one another.”

Non-essential economic activity should have been comprehensively shut down months ago, another worker said. “Six months ago, had there been a shutdown, things would’ve been different. It is being passed through the plants, stores and schools. People

need to stay home. Wearing masks at Allison is required but not enforced. It is clearly real with the number of infections growing.”

Allison workers build commercial transmissions parts and supply government contracts. The company continued production even while much of the auto industry was shut down from mid-March to mid-May, claiming a “critical infrastructure” designation under the auspices of the local and state governments and the departments of Homeland Security and Defense.

In an email in March, Allison Transmission workers were told: “While this is a frightening time, we must come together in order to keep each other safe and to meet our customers’ needs. Allison has been designated as a part of the essential critical infrastructure by the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense. We must all do everything we can to ensure the safe continued operation of this business so that it can continue to provide the critical products that are so critical to the safety of the U.S. during this difficult time.”

Workers were told by supervisors that if a worker tests positive, then a cleaning crew “fogs” the area in which the infected person worked. A document published by the World Health Organization, however, explained the risks of fogging infected surfaces: “In indoor spaces, routine application of disinfectants to environmental surfaces by spraying or fogging (also known as fumigation or misting) is not recommended for COVID-19. One study has shown that spraying as a primary disinfection strategy is ineffective in removing contaminants outside of direct spray zones.” The fogging can produce side effects, risking eye, respiratory and skin irritation. These same cleaning methods are used at the FCA Warren Truck Plant, where at least six people have died from COVID-19.

Another worker commented on the inadequacy of safety protocols, saying, “We have six-foot markers, but we cross paths all the time. Most people who had COVID had different symptoms, lost taste or smell, and severe headaches.”

The automakers and the United Auto Workers union have ignored the advice of public health experts that shutdowns are necessary to bring rampant community spread under control and have sought to deny that manufacturing and other workplaces are vectors for new outbreaks of the virus.

In responding to the malign neglect of the companies and unions, one worker told the WSWS, “At Allison the only way of knowing infections is through texts. The UAW says nothing, they basically share offices with the company. I’d like to see everything down for months, whatever it takes. Give trillions [back] to people to live on. I’m all for that. If it were up to me, that’s what would happen. I’m all for shutting down the plants. We all need to be on the same page globally.”

As with much of the industrialized Midwest, COVID-19 has surged throughout Indiana since last fall. At the time of this writing, the state has over 8,150 reported deaths and over 529,000 cases, according to the state’s department of health.

Workers at auto assembly and parts plants throughout the state have written to the *Autoworker Newsletter* in recent months in alarm over the growing number of cases, including at GM Fort Wayne Assembly, Lear Corporation’s seating plant in Hammond, and at Faurecia Gladstone in Columbus, where workers organized a rank-and-file safety committee independent of the union last year in order to fight for safe working conditions.

Hospitals in the state continue to struggle to treat the surging number of patients. Vice president of medical affairs at Franciscan Health Indianapolis, Dr. Christopher Doehring, told the *Indianapolis Star* that the hospital has been treating record numbers of COVID-19 patients every day over the last two weeks, and that area hospitals are operating at or above capacity.

At Riley Children’s Hospital, also in Indianapolis, at least one child succumbed to the coronavirus, contradicting the pseudoscience used in the policy of reopening schools to in-person instruction. The WSWS

has received countless reports from educators, parents and students of the growing number of cases in schools nationwide.

However, the corporate, bipartisan drive to reopen schools at the beginning of 2021 is nevertheless forging ahead, despite the already catastrophic state of the health system and spiraling cases. Dr. Virginia Caine, Marion County’s public health director (located in the state capital Indianapolis), amended a statement of an earlier public health order in November. The original order called on schools to remain closed and to deliver instruction remotely until January 18. Caine changed her order to allow schools to open by January 4. Between October and December, the number of new student cases of COVID-19 jumped by over 2,000 in Indiana, now totaling 19,057, with teachers and staff increasing to over 8,000 cases to date.

Throughout the pandemic, the American ruling class has prioritized profits over the lives and health of millions of working people. While the banks and the stock markets were flooded with trillions of dollars, workers were sent back to work in order to keep the flow of profits continuing.

Workers at Allison Transmission must unite with their brothers and sisters throughout the automotive industry and working class. Allison workers should begin to form rank-and-file safety committees independent of the union, as their brothers and sisters have at the Faurecia auto parts plant in nearby Columbus and link up with the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network, which is connecting autoworkers in order to prepare for an international struggle for workers’ rights.

The network and its member committees are demanding the shutdown of non-essential production and schools and full compensation for workers, to be paid for by the expropriation of the trillions of dollars used to bail out Wall Street and the corporations.

To learn more about joining or forming a rank-and-file safety committee at Allison or another plant, contact the Autoworker Newsletter today.



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