

“You tell someone you have COVID, you are in trouble”

UAW-FCA cover-up of outbreaks continues at Toledo Jeep complex

Shannon Jones
5 January 2021

Fiat Chrysler (FCA), with the support of the United Auto Workers, is continuing to cover up cases of COVID-19 at the Jeep assembly complex in Toledo, Ohio even as the company increases production of its highly profitable Wrangler and Gladiator vehicles.

FCA maintained a full production schedule over the holidays in Toledo as well as at other major assembly plants, despite dire concerns on the part of workers over the virtually uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus.

A veteran Toledo Jeep worker spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the situation at the plant.

“We’ve never slowed down. At first, we had 45 minutes a day for extra cleaning time. That meant 21 fewer vehicles a shift for the Gladiator, 47 vehicles a shift for Wrangler. But they have continued to push and push for extra production. They hit 200 vehicles a day per shift even with the downtime.”

He said management continues to use intimidation to prevent workers from receiving factual information about the spread of COVID-19 in the plant. “People are told they are not supposed to tell anyone about having it. Tell someone you have a family emergency or something along those lines, anything other than that you are out for COVID. You tell someone you have COVID, you are in trouble, they call that ‘inciting panic.’”

“I know of a worker who was sent home, who had COVID. Her boss told her team leader she was out taking care of her sister. The two teams she was around didn’t get quarantined at all. Her actual team had mostly seniors. The two TPTs (temporary part-time workers) on the team were in their 50s as well. Some have medical issues [with their] lungs, kidneys. For

them not to be told to quarantine was criminal.”

He noted that FCA and other auto companies have been totally exempted from the limited COVID-19 safety measures in place around the state. “In Ohio, we have a curfew; bars and restaurants are supposed to close after 10 p.m. Churches are closed. They are supposedly superspreader events. But why aren’t workplaces considered superspreader events? You have thousands of people crowded together with crappy airflow. That’s because they are just stand-alone entities against a multi-billion-dollar corporation. It’s all BS.”

The Jeep worker noted that Ohio Governor Mike Dewine had allowed the reopening of schools. Further, he had instructed that “If a kid at school is exposed to a student or teacher with COVID, as long as they are wearing a mask, they don’t have to quarantine. That’s stupid. Who’s to say these masks from home are effective? Is there a carbon filter?”

“At work we have these hospital-type masks that say right on the box, ‘does not stop the spread of COVID-19.’ Why are we wearing them, then? It’s not doing much, because COVID is spreading like wildfire (at Jeep). If I was to go out, they could bring in someone at half my pay. So, they don’t care. It’s not like they are getting sued.”

In the midst of this, FCA has forged ahead with its planned merger with PSA Group. On Monday, shareholders of both companies approved the merger, which is set to be consummated January 16, creating Stellantis, the fourth largest automaker in the world. FCA CEO Mike Manley and CFO Richard Palmer will be eligible for tens of millions in “cash retention” awards because of the deal.

Manley could receive up to 51.4 million euros (\$62.7 million) as a “cash retention award.” Part of that payment will be based on FCA’s share price as of December 30, giving Manley a further incentive to drive up production and profits.

The merger will set the stage for brutal cost cutting, as the merged company eliminates “inefficiencies” to boost its competitive stature against its transnational rivals. This will be under conditions of a global economic crisis, growing trade conflict and ferocious competition over the development of electric and self-driving vehicles and other so-called “mobility technologies.”

PSA CEO Carlos Tavares, who will head the new Stellantis, has been described as having a “Darwinian mindset” and enjoys a reputation as a cost cutter. Sizeable job cuts will inevitably follow the merger.

The worker said, “They are still boasting record profits with all this going on. It doesn’t make sense for them to be pushing production this hard. They still have a good supply of vehicles out there.”

He tied the push for production to the FCA-PSA merger. “In fact it is not a merger, FCA is being bought out. The head of FCA [Manley] isn’t on the board, he is just going to be head of US sales and marketing.

“They [FCA] got a bailout from the Italian government. They got that and they are still boasting record profits.”

On Monday, Alphons Iacobelli, the chief labor negotiator for FCA in the 2015 contract talks with the United Auto Workers union, had his sentence reduced by a federal judge for his cooperation with federal prosecutors in the investigation of UAW corruption. In addition, the judge recommended Iacobelli serve out the last portion of his sentence under home confinement, at his luxury mansion, rather than at a halfway house.

FCA bribed top UAW officials with cash and gifts to obtain favorable contract terms, including the right to hire virtually unlimited numbers of lower paid temporary part-time workers. Fifteen people, including former UAW presidents Gary Jones and Dennis Williams, were convicted as a result of the investigation, likely only the tip of the iceberg.

Iacobelli and others convicted in the investigation got relatively light sentences, involving stays at “country club” style prisons for white-collar criminals.

In December, the Justice Department announced a settlement with the UAW. Under terms of the agreement, the federal government gave remaining UAW officials, including acting UAW President Rory Gamble—who had earlier been named as a target by investigators—a clean bill of health. In exchange, the union agreed to a few minor “reforms.”

The Jeep worker said, “They claimed they were going to get rid of the bad guys like Dennis Williams who were stealing money, but the people he appointed are still in their positions. Someone like Rory Gamble and Williams will appoint like-minded people who will not ask questions.”

He noted that the sons of former UAW Vice President for Fiat Chrysler Norwood Jewell, who was convicted of taking bribes, “are high officials in the UAW.” He added, “They shouldn’t be there.”

“Instead of fighting for us, now the UAW fighting for us to pay them to say what is best for us, which is really based on what the company tells them is best for us.”

The worker said that the result of the pandemic had been a bonanza for the rich and a disaster for workers and small businesses.

“I was just reading a *Forbes* article that there were 56 new billionaires since the start of the pandemic. Just think of that 56, at a time when the economy is down because of COVID.

“I believe they are trying to put all these small companies out of business. That’s why most of these supposed small business loans went to big companies. Why are companies making \$100 million a year filing for loans? They made it so hard for everyone else to get assistance. It is only about helping them out.”



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