

Ford “Finish Strong” ad campaign invokes nationalist mythology as cover for company’s “herd immunity” policies

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Ford Motor Company has unleashed a multi-million-dollar ad campaign, under the tagline “Finish Strong,” which calls on viewers to unite across the country to continue wearing masks and observing social distancing measures during what it presents as the final months of the pandemic. Self-consciously cast in the mold of World War II propaganda filmstrips, Ford implores Americans to band together and push through hardship to defeat the coronavirus.

In a 30-second TV commercial, narration by former *Breaking Bad* actor Bryan Cranston assures people that soon everything will be back to normal, while a montage of health care workers and vaccines rolling down the assembly line plays. “Let’s hold the line,” Cranston reads, “protect it, fight for it, sacrifice it. Let’s look out for each other... soon we will be what we were.”

The spot then segues to scenes of activities which Ford’s ideal consumers do in ordinary times—going to rodeos and high school football games, group dancing in empty streets, attending concerts, etc. American flags feature in the background of many shots.

The commercial was apparently rushed into production at the end of last year in a last-minute switch. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, Ford has redirected half of its marketing budget for the New Year, which had originally been earmarked towards promoting its top-selling F-150 pickup truck, behind the new ad. The spot featured prominently in the annual media blitz during the college football bowl games and is slated for the upcoming NFL Super Bowl, typically the biggest advertising events of the year in the US.

The first thing to note is the staggering level of hypocrisy involved in Ford lecturing the public about the need to “sacrifice” to fight the pandemic. Ford’s own plants, which are running at near-capacity with no meaningful social distancing measures, have been key vectors of infection and death, both for autoworkers and the surrounding communities. At least 11 Ford workers died in the US by May, and more would have died had workers not forced a halt to production through a wildcat strike wave.

There are no publicly available nationwide figures on infections and deaths in the auto plants since they reopened in the summer. This is because of a massive cover-up by the auto companies and the United Auto Workers, which are straining to keep production at the highest levels possible. Ford’s shutdown last week of its Louisville Assembly Plant is the only shutdown of a major Ford plant in the US since May—and it was not due to the surge in cases

in Louisville and in the state of Kentucky, but due to a global shortage of semiconductors.

As of this writing, over 384,000 Americans have died of COVID-19, according to the website Worldometer. Nearly all of these deaths could have been prevented through the use of targeted lockdowns, widespread testing and contact tracing. But the corporate oligarchy, with the support of both parties, rejected this from the start because a shutdown of nonessential production would cut across their profits and threaten the multi-trillion-dollar run-up of stock prices on Wall Street.

“Ford is trying to make like they are really concerned for the workers. We know that’s not really the truth,” a worker at Ford’s Kansas City Assembly Plant said. “I just heard of another death of a worker from COVID-19, and Ford is being hush-hush about it. We don’t know how many people have COVID-19. They are telling people who worked with him not to talk about it.

“Third quarter profits for the Big Three [Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler] are through the roof. The billionaires have increased their wealth and taken everything. Trillions of dollars were given to Wall Street. Compare that to what they did to the working class. They forced us back to work.”

“The rules in the plant are not safe. Their temperature checks do nothing,” a worker at Ford’s Dearborn Truck Plant added. “People have died, and the family members of workers have died. Because they have refused to close down, they have caused the spread of the virus and the deaths that have resulted.

“They say the pandemic is almost over. But it’s not. At this rate, the vaccine will take a year at least to reach us. And we do not know how long it will be effective. We need to shut the whole country down.”

In a news release, Kumar Galhotra, president of Americas & International Markets Group, said, “We’re in this together and Ford’s goal since the pandemic started has been to try to help save lives. While many are weary from the challenges 2020 has thrown at us, now is the time for us to pull together, protect each other and finish strong until COVID-19 vaccines arrive more broadly. Lives are on the line.”

Lives are certainly on the line. But the proven way to save lives until vaccines are widely available and the pandemic is contained is to shut down all nonessential production, including the auto industry, while providing full compensation to all affected

workers. But the Ford bosses, Wall Street and the UAW are thoroughly opposed to this. That is why workers must take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees to unite with teachers, nurses and all other workers in preparation of a general strike.

Ford's advertising blitz is aimed at covering up its own crimes, and those of the capitalist ruling class as a whole, with patriotic, militaristic bluster, portraying the virus as a common external enemy for the country to unite against. This was underscored in Ford's choice of director for the spot, Peter Berg, director of mindless action films such as *Patriots Day*, *Mile 22* and *Lone Survivor*, which glorify the police, military and CIA. Berg did a previous eight-minute propaganda film for Ford about the company's production of ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE).

However, it was left to the *Free Press*, which has long functioned as a publicity arm for the Detroit automakers and the UAW, to make this even more explicit. To accompany its article, it produced a separate video that contained a frenzied mashup of a World War II propaganda film on war production with shots of modern-day warehouse and health care workers. The film feverishly cuts back and forth between a picture of the coronavirus and images of bombs, artillery and tanks.

The caption beneath the film reads: "WWII efforts parallel coronavirus efforts—Americans are at work in the battle against COVID-19. During WWII, they worked as the 'Arsenal of Democracy' to defeat a much different foe." The reference is meant to draw a parallel between the response to coronavirus and the nationwide mobilization of industrial capacity behind the war effort.

"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," the 18th-century writer Samuel Johnson famously said. By casting the pandemic in patriotic-military terms, Ford and the *Free Press* cover up the essential question: with whom is Ford and the capitalist ruling class really at war?

In fact, it is not against the coronavirus, but against society. Their real attitude is summed up, not in "hold the line," but "over the top," the command which led to the senseless slaughter of troops in no-man's land during the trench warfare of the First World War. They are sacrificing hundreds of thousands of human lives to shore up stock values and profits. By maintaining full production during the pandemic, Ford increased its profits *six-fold* in the third quarter of last year, to \$2.4 billion.

But Johnson's adage applied equally to the US war effort in World War II. American capitalism was not at war to defend "democracy" from Nazi Germany, but to establish itself as the world's imperialist superpower. To accomplish this, it did not hesitate to jail socialists, ban strikes, herd Japanese-Americans into concentration camps and incinerate the civilian populations of Germany and Japan, most infamously in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Moreover, wartime labor policies served to incorporate the American trade unions into the state apparatus and were a major factor in the growth of the union bureaucracy and the loss of any democratic control by workers over these organizations.

Ford himself, a notorious anti-Semite, was the most open of all

US corporate heads in supporting Hitler. He is the only American mentioned by name in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The *Dearborn Independent*, a newspaper controlled by Ford in the 1920s, regularly published anti-Semitic forgeries and had a significant influence on the development of Nazi ideology. His fascist sympathies were deeply connected to his violent hostility to Ford workers' attempts to organize themselves against factory exploitation. Striking workers in 1941 carried signs denouncing Ford's ties to the Nazis.

The comparison to World War II is absurd for another reason. During the war, much of the economy was redirected towards war production. In contrast, the response by federal and state governments to the coronavirus has been totally piecemeal and inadequate, with shortages of ICU beds, ventilators, oxygen and PPE throughout the country.

While the *Free Press* brags that Ford has used a small portion of its manufacturing base to create ventilators, face shields and other supplies, this has been entirely inadequate to meet demand. To make matters worse, only about 10 percent of ventilators built with great fanfare by the non-medical equipment companies were full intensive care unit (ICU) ventilators of a type doctors and ventilator specialists say they would normally use to intubate patients suffering from Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS).

Ford's sudden pivot to the "Finish Strong" campaign is not merely due to marketing imperatives. It demonstrates a deep degree of anxiety felt in corporate boardrooms throughout the world that the experiences of the past year, to which one can now add Trump's coup attempt, will inevitably produce an explosive social response in the working class. Ford apparently imagines that a slickly produced marketing campaign can convince workers that "we're all in this together."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Workers want to save lives and their livelihoods at the same time. The corporate owners want profit, no matter how many lives are lost. The only way to "finish strong" is for workers to shut down all nonessential production and demand the reallocation of the trillions handed over to the Wall Street swindlers and major corporations to provide full income to workers and vastly expand the production and distribution of the vaccine so the pandemic can be eradicated.

To fight for this, workers must build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corrupt UAW, and a mass political movement to fight for socialism, including the expropriation of the wealth of the pandemic profiteers and transformation of the auto industry into a public utility, collectively owned and controlled by the working class. To build the leadership for this battle, we urge workers to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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