

# In apparent cost-cutting move, Stellantis introduces lower-quality face masks at Sterling Stamping Plant

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Stellantis' (formerly Fiat Chrysler) Sterling Stamping Plant (SSP) has been a center of COVID-19 infections in recent weeks. The plant, located in the northern suburbs of Detroit, is the largest stamping plant in the world, with some 2,100 employees. The Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee reported last November that infections were spreading out of control at the plant. Since then, dozens of new infections have been reported to workers.

While Stellantis and the other automakers claim that they are taking precautions to prevent outbreaks in their plants, autoworkers have reported for months that even the token measures implemented after the restart of production last May have been progressively abandoned.

However, the personal protective equipment (PPE) which the automakers provided workers was inadequate from the very beginning. In spite of repeated advice by public health experts that workers at risk of infection should wear N95 masks, which provide a higher level of air filtration, workers have only been provided with generic surgical masks at the start of their shifts.

However, even as the virus continues to kill 3,000 people per day in the United States, and Dr. Anthony Fauci has called on people to wear two masks when out of their homes, Stellantis management at Sterling Stamping has stopped giving out even the surgical masks it had been previously providing. Instead, the company is providing workers with new masks that appear to offer much lower levels of protection.

The new masks lack the water-resistant blue outer layers which are normally used with surgical masks, and have a texture that is highly absorbent and transparent and that workers have compared to tissue

paper. They carry no safety rating whatsoever, either from the government of China, where the masks were produced, or by the American ASTM (formerly known as American Society for Testing and Materials).

The masks are "Much thinner ... three ply, yet the outer two layer are transparent," a Sterling Stamping worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. "This appears to be the result of cost cutting. Less cost, Less filtration, and an increase in new variant infections. This is what it looks like to me."

The new masks appear to be only "applicable to daily life to filter pollen, willow wool, bacterial particles and block nasal or oral exhalation or ejection of pollutants to wear protective masks," the worker continued. "I believe we have a problem. This Identification is ONLY on the outside of the shipping box!"

The masks are produced by a Stellantis subsidiary, Comau LLC, based in Southfield, Michigan. The company, which operates dozens of facilities throughout the world, including North America, Europe and China, specializes in robotics and automation. It has no background at all in producing medical supplies or PPE. The masks themselves come in boxes branded with the FCA company logo.

The new masks have not been approved for use by the Food and Drug Administration. Instead, they have been authorized by the government for use on an emergency basis under the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act, which provides for temporary authorizations in cases of public health emergencies. This is indicated by a disclaimer on the packages that the masks are shipped in, which are not provided to employees themselves.

The packages also include the following disclaimer:  
"Not recommended for: 1. Use in any surgical setting or where significant exposure to liquid, bodily or other hazardous fluids, may be expected; 2. Use in a clinical setting where the infection risk level through inhalation exposure is high; 3. Use in the presence of high intensity heat source or flammable gas.

Last Tuesday, Harvard public health professor Joseph G. Allen penned an editorial for the *Washington Post* calling for ASTM rated N95 masks to be used by the general public: "A typical cloth mask might capture half of all respiratory aerosols that come out of our mouth when we talk, sing or just breathe. A tightly woven cloth mask might get you to 60 or 70 percent, and a blue surgical mask can get you to 70 or 80 percent.

"But there's no reason any essential worker—and, really, everyone in the country—should go without masks that filter 95 percent.

"The masks I'm referring to, of course, are N95s. These are cheap—pre-pandemic they cost about 50 cents—and easy to manufacture. Yet our country has failed to invoke the Defense Production Act to produce enough masks for health-care workers and other essential workers. That needs to change, as my colleagues at Harvard Medical School have written."

Stellantis' apparent cost-cutting measures on such a basic necessity as facemasks give the lie to their perfunctory statements of concern "to protect employees, their families and the surrounding communities." In reality, management at Stellantis as well as the other automakers have been colluding with the United Auto Workers union for months to cover up the spread of the infections and to force workers to endure record levels of overtime to make up for absences and lost production earlier last year.

For much of the past year, the auto industry has boasted, to considerable acclaim from the corporate press, about its decision to divert a small portion of its industrial capacity towards the creation of ventilators, face shields and other safety equipment. The most bombastic promotion has come from the *Detroit Free Press*, which compared it to the measures during World War II to mobilize the entire economy of the country to produce bombers, tanks and other weapons of war. In reality, this was always first and foremost a public relations ploy by the auto companies, meant above all

to facilitate the reopening of auto plants after a wildcat strike forced the industry in North America to close last March.

Fiat Chrysler/Stellantis announced last March that it would begin producing face masks for US healthcare workers out of one of its plants in China. It is unclear at this point whether the masks at Sterling Stamping are of the same design which the company is producing for healthcare workers.

Regardless, autoworkers must be provided with N95 masks or better. However, even if higher quality masks are distributed, there are no conditions under which the auto industry and other nonessential industries can be operated safely. Workers must demand the closure of nonessential production as well as schools, with full compensation for laid-off workers, to prevent further infections and death. This requires as well full support by autoworkers for the struggle of Chicago teachers, who are resisting demands by the administration of Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot for a return to in-person instruction.

To conduct such a struggle, the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* is helping workers to construct a network of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of both the unions and the Democratic and Republican parties, at workplaces throughout the country. Such a committee was established at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant last year, and workers at the adjacent Sterling Stamping plant participate actively in the work of the committee.

*To join a rank-and-file committee at your workplace, or for help building one, contact the World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter at [autoworkers@wsws.org](mailto:autoworkers@wsws.org).*



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