

Delays to Big Three auto companies' vaccination program highlight profit motive driving pandemic response

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All three Detroit-based automakers—Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler)—have announced that plans to roll out distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to workers are delayed due to vaccine shortages, according to a report published in the *Detroit Free Press* last week.

General Motors had plans to inform workers in December when they would be able to receive the vaccine and how the company planned to administer it on a voluntary basis. Ford had bought 12 ultra-cold storage freezers to keep doses of the Pfizer vaccine, freezers which still remain empty. Thus far, neither company has made their vaccination plans public.

Stellantis is the only company of the Big Three automakers that has administered first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to any of its employees. It was only able to secure 1,200 first-dose shots through the Boone County Health Department to administer to just over one-third of the workforce of 3,580 at its Belvidere Assembly Plant in Belvidere, Illinois. Stellantis has no plans in place for getting vaccines to the rest of its global workforce.

Two questions arise from the situation. First: Why has the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine been farmed out to private corporations like GM in the first place for the exclusive use of their employees?

Second: Why are autoworkers, manifestly nonessential workers, being given priority while many health care workers, grocery store workers, logistics workers, the elderly and medically vulnerable have yet to receive vaccines?

Vaccine distribution, like the overall response to the pandemic, has exposed the criminal incompetence of the ruling class and its indifference to the preservation of human life. The vaccination effort has been marked by a lack of systemization and planning, with the result that only a small percentage of the US population has been immunized.

The US has taken a decentralized approach to vaccine distribution, leaving it up to the resources of local and state-level health departments to secure and distribute the temperature-sensitive Moderna and Pfizer vaccines to hospitals, commercial pharmacies and health centers. Members of the public have been largely left to fend for themselves in scheduling appointments, finding vaccination sites that have supplies available, and transporting themselves to get the shots.

The systematic defunding of public health by capitalist

governments has contributed to this debacle both in the US and globally. The companies that produce the COVID-19 vaccines currently administered in the US, Pfizer and Moderna, rely on special equipment and supplies to produce the vaccine. The companies are facing a bottleneck as they compete against one another to buy up scarce components, such as lipids, that are needed for vaccine production.

A shortage of the syringes needed to administer the vaccine is also creating administration delays, according to a February 13 report by the Madison, Wisconsin, journal *Capital Times*. The winter storm that devastated much of the US with relentless ice and snow over the past several weeks has also delayed shipments of the vaccines to and from major transport hubs in the US, exacerbating and prolonging existing shortages.

Speaking to the *Free Press*, Stellantis spokeswoman Jodi Tinson said, “We have no control. Like everyone else, it’s the state and local governments that are determining when and how many. ... We’re working with Boone County on getting a second dose for the 1,200 people who got the first shot. When they’ll have more for the rest of the plant, that’s for them to determine. We wait.”

The continuation of auto production, involving massive factories that serve as vectors of COVID-19 transmission while the pandemic continues unchecked, cuts across any rational plan to contain the pandemic. The same is the case for the drive by the Biden administration to reopen face-to-face instruction in schools based on the false claim that schools are not sources of the spread of the virus.

Democratic and Republican officials have supported the designation of auto manufacturing as critical industries, giving an official cover to the crude prioritization of profits over human lives. This has been abetted by the United Auto Workers, which has supported to the hilt the restart of auto production by providing a smokescreen of inadequate safety measures while helping management cover up the spread of the coronavirus in the auto plants.

But autoworkers know that, unlike health care workers, food production and distribution workers, and transportation and logistics workers, their jobs building cars that will sit for months in lots are not truly essential to the functioning of society during a pandemic. They are only essential to the handful of wealthy elites who make a profit from the vehicles they produce.

As one worker at the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, “It doesn’t make sense to be building \$60,000-80,000 vehicles during a pandemic and making record profits. How are they even doing that? To get through a pandemic and not miss a beat? The companies are being propped up by the government and the upper echelons are profiting.”

The United Auto Workers accepts uncritically that all considerations of health and safety are to be subordinated to the profit requirements of the auto companies “The UAW continues to work with the Biden administration, the Detroit Three and all of our employers on vaccine distribution plans,” UAW spokesman Brian Rothenberg told the *Free Press*. “Those plans will be implemented when the vaccine is available, how much is available at a given time and other distribution variables by state.”

In 2020 GM made a pretax profit of \$9.7 billion, up from \$8.4 billion in 2019 despite a drop in auto US sales from 2.9 million to 2.5 million vehicles and the outbreak of the deadly pandemic. Ford did not beat its 2019 profits, but still accumulated a substantial \$2.8 billion in earnings before interest and taxes for 2020, a huge sum considering the global fall in vehicle sales.

These vast profits were sweated out of the labor of workers, who were forced back to work in unsafe factories globally, beginning in the US in May 2020. The resumption in production followed wildcat work stoppages by rank-and-file workers across the globe, in defiance of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and other trade unions, that forced plants across North America and in Europe to shut down in March 2020 as the pandemic began to spread rapidly.

The US-based auto corporations began herding workers back into unsafe plants in May with the help of the UAW and Democratic lawmakers like Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker and Michigan Representative Debbie Dingell, whose district includes the area where Ford’s Dearborn Truck Plant is located.

Workers have reported that no stepped-up safety precautions are being taken as new, more infectious variants are on the rise throughout the US. Early on, workers were given flimsy masks while cleaning supplies, hand sanitizers and gloves ran out regularly, and social distancing was impossible as thousands of workers per shift were called back.

As cases among autoworkers mounted and workers died of COVID-19, the UAW worked with the corporations and the media to systematically black out information on workers who tested positive in the plant and who may have died. As a result, countless numbers of autoworkers continue to fall ill with COVID-19 and die all for the sake of corporate profits.

A Stellantis worker from Kokomo, Indiana voiced frustration with the distribution of the vaccines: “They asked us on our log-in questionnaire if we were interested in getting a vaccine. This was on our entry questions about COVID-19.

“There has never been a real plan on how to roll out the vaccine. There’s no excuse for the lack of organization. It’s chaos! All these same situations seem to repeat themselves. Empty promises. It’s more of the same. All talk and no action. There needs to be a plan for every issue, a problem with a solution. [Biden] put so many experts in place, he needs to make use of them. [The

Democrats] can only make promises they can’t keep. They talk a good game, but never follow through.”

Several programmatic demands necessarily flow from these realities:

- All nonessential businesses must be shut down and all workers and small businesses must be provided full compensation.

- Workers must demand an end to the anarchic free-for-all of the rollout and insist on a science-based and centralized effort to distribute vaccines, beginning with the most vulnerable sections of the population, as quickly and widely as possible. A portion of the massive sums of wealth that have driven up the stock markets must be expropriated from the corporations to implement and carry out these efforts.

- Finally, this must be an international effort. The pandemic itself respects no national boundaries and no national program is sufficient to solve it. The working class must demand a stop to the disproportionate buying up of quantities of vaccines and treatments by wealthier countries in order for it to be distributed equally worldwide.

The fight for these essential measures clashes with the profit requirements of the corporations. They raise the necessity for the adoption of a socialist program, ending the anarchy of capitalist production by placing the auto industry, pharmaceuticals and other giant industries under the democratic public ownership of the working class.

To fight for these measures the working class must organize independently of the union by building and expanding a network of rank-and-file safety committees to link workers up across industries and national borders in opposition to the homicidal policies of the ruling class.



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