

Automakers halt production at 18 plants in Brazil

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This week, 10 automakers in Brazil—Volkswagen, Volkswagen Trucks and Buses, Mercedes-Benz, General Motors, Nissan, Toyota, Renault, Volvo, Scania and Honda—suspended totally or partially their production, sending more than 50,000 workers home for periods ranging between five and 15 days, depending on the plant.

The shutdown was an initiative of the companies themselves and, in the midst of the uncontrolled pandemic in the country, was presented as an effort to fight COVID-19. Brazil has so far registered more than 320,000 COVID-19 deaths, with a record of 3,869 deaths on Wednesday. March ended as the deadliest month of the entire pandemic.

The first to announce its closure, Volkswagen, which employs about 15,000 workers in the country, said it would suspend production at its four plants for 12 days “in order to preserve the health of its employees and their families.” The management of Mercedes-Benz, Scania, Nissan, Renault and Honda have made similar announcements.

But there are other reasons pushing billion-dollar companies like these to halt their production, and the first one on their list is certainly not the “health of their employees.”

First of all, it is important to underscore that such measures have been taken exclusively in the auto industry, which is undergoing a deep restructuring of production, with substantial workforce reductions in every country, and which is currently facing parts shortages in different parts of the globe.

A March 18 article in *Folha de São Paulo* reported that Honda’s plant in Sumaré, in the state of São Paulo, which employs around a thousand workers, was the first automaker to stop its production for lack of electronic circuits. Production had already been halted for a week in February and for another 10 days in March, and this week it has stopped again.

Other companies, such as Toyota, Volkswagen, Renault, Volvo and Mercedes-Benz, had already halted or reduced production. According to the same report, Volkswagen Trucks and Buses (VWCO) had been keeping unfinished

vehicles in the lot waiting for parts, and when the parts arrived, the employees had to work overtime to finish the job. Now, VWCO is shutting down the plant completely from March 29 to April 4, keeping its 3,500 workers at home.

Volvo, which followed its competitors in adopting the pretense of fighting the pandemic, was one of the only ones to admit that the measure was also due to the instability in the parts supply chain. Its plant in Curitiba, in the state of Paraná, was not totally paralyzed, but production was reduced during the last eight days, with about 2,000 fewer workers.

It is clear that the companies have made a calculation. Foreseeing the need for new stoppages due to the instability in the production chain as well as cuts imposed by their own restructuring plans, many, if not all of them, took advantage of the pandemic conditions to justify their shutdowns as a benevolent act in the interests of their workers. It was, at the same time, a way to prevent an action by the working class in response to the increasing infections in the factories.

In the industrial complex of ABC, in São Paulo, which currently has five plants shut down (Mercedes, Volks, Scania, Toyota and GM—with a total of about 30,000 workers at home), the Metalworkers Union (SMABC) presented the production halt as an achievement of their negotiations with the companies.

A few weeks ago, as the pandemic worsened in the country and especially in São Paulo, the union was criticized by workers witnessing an increase in deaths among their colleagues.

On the Facebook page of the Mercedes CSE (Company’s Union Committee), which is an arm of the SMABC, a worker commented on the news of a colleague’s death:

“That’s very sad. ... It is also sad that many people are being infected inside the company and they still claim that it all comes from the outside. Is it a coincidence that the same department [of the plant] has more than 6 people infected, all coming from the outside? How many more will have to die for someone to take an attitude? Many people go to work

afraid of being infected and infecting someone back at home who may be in higher risk. But the company just wants to know about production, because inside there we are just another number that died and they will put a new one in our place. But you can't replace a family member."

Other workers warned about the lack of basic preventive measures. "Hand sanitizer is missing in many dispensers; the one in my leisure area, for example, only saw alcohol at the moment it was installed," commented one of them. "Go at 11 o'clock in the cafeteria and you'll see the crowding. An invitation for contagion," said another.

"It's past time for the union to organize a plant shutdown. Last year when the situation was not at this level, there were collective [vacations] and bimonthly employee alternation. ... Now that we are in a much worse scenario, we are all working normally!" said another worker.

These comments come from workers at the Mercedes plant in São Bernardo do Campo, which has already recorded six deaths of employees, four of them in March alone. The plant has the second highest number of infections in the region, according to *Diário do Grande ABC*. With a total workforce of 8,500, Mercedes-Benz had 1,447 (17 percent) infected workers.

First on the list is Volkswagen, with 1,560 infections, or 18.3 percent of the approximately 8,500 employees. It had registered five deaths up to March 21. At Scania, 761, or 19 percent of the approximately 4,000 employees were infected, and one died. At Toyota, 137 were infected, or 9.1 percent of the 1,500 employees.

Trying to minimize the unsafe conditions at the assembly plants, which have an infection rate three times higher than the national average, SMABC president Wagner Santana told *Diário do Grande ABC* that this difference is due to the fact that the auto companies have tested 100 percent of their workers, and that if there was mass testing in the country, the national average would be equal or higher than that of the plants. This argument was angrily refuted by a GM worker on the comments section: "A hundred percent were tested? I work at an assembly plant and that didn't occur."

The union official's effort to protect the company went even further. Echoing the claims of capitalist managers, he implied that workers get infected at home or in the streets, not in their workplaces.

"No matter how much [the auto plants] present the feeling of being very safe, since they really do everything possible to make the work environment safer, even more so if we compare it to someone who works in a store ... and has to take a crowded bus to get there, the worker is not safe. Moreover because he doesn't live in the assembly plant. He circulates. He goes home to his family, to the supermarket," Santana argued.

The loyalty of the unions to the automakers, explicitly expressed by Santana, is fundamental to guaranteeing that the response to the pandemic remains subordinated to the interests of the transnational capitalist groups controlling these companies. The terms of the shutdown of the production underscores this: the companies are considering the days off as "time off," to be compensated later by the workers.

Some of these companies are also counting on the calendar of municipal holidays. In an attempt to counter the catastrophic spread of the pandemic, several cities have rescheduled holidays in order to create a period of 10 consecutive days off, starting this week. Others companies have opted to give collective vacations to their employees and, in these cases, the workers will not have to make up work days, but they have lost their right to choose their vacation period.

Moreover, the established period for these shutdowns is totally insufficient to really contribute to the fight against the pandemic. In most of the factories, work will resume on April 6. With the current pace of the pandemic in Brazil, with daily averages of over 75,000 new infections and more than 3,000 deaths, there is no possibility that the situation will be under control in less than a week; in fact the expectations are that it will be worse. In other words, workers will return to be infected in the unsafe environments of the factories, and deaths will increase again.

This path of death must be rejected by autoworkers throughout the industry with a strike that prevents their return to work, demanding full payment of their salaries while isolation is necessary. All the costs must be paid out of the profits accumulated by the automakers, and not with layoffs or overtime work.

This policy can only be advanced through the formation of rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions. These committees should appeal to every section of the working class for a general strike to stop the pandemic, closing every non-essential activity and guaranteeing full income for all working families.



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