

# Record surge in coronavirus cases at Stellantis' Sterling Stamping Plant

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A major outbreak of the coronavirus is underway at Stellantis' Sterling Stamping Plant near Detroit. At least 28 infections are confirmed to have occurred in the plant last month, the highest monthly total on record. Sterling Stamping is the largest auto stamping plant in the world, with a workforce of nearly 2,200.

The outbreak at the facility takes place amid a massive surge of COVID-19 in the state of Michigan, driven especially by outbreaks in factories and schools. In little more than a month, cases statewide have increased seven-fold to 7,107 on Wednesday, closing in rapidly on the record highs in November.

The *World Socialist Web Site* previously published a report on infections at Sterling Stamping on November 10. At the time, the plant had experienced a total of 26 confirmed cases. Since that time, according to a review of data provided to the WSWS, the cumulative number has reached 90 cases.

Sterling Stamping is unusual in that it is one of the few major auto plants in America which reports infections to its workforce, through text messages sent by United Auto Workers Local 1264. However, the union does not make this information, which was provided to the WSWS anonymously by autoworkers, publicly available. The union provides no information beyond the last day a worker was in the plant and the department that they worked in. They have provided no details on the number of workers who have been hospitalized or whether any workers have died. Each text ends with the copy-and-pasted statement: "Management has assured the Union that cleaning protocols and contact tracing have been followed."

For the past year, the UAW, together with management, has been engaged in a massive cover-up of infections and deaths in the auto industry. There are no publicly available figures on the number of

infections in auto plants or the total number of autoworkers who have died. However, it is certain that the death toll is at least in the dozens. At least six workers have died at a single auto plant, Stellantis' Warren Truck Assembly Plant, which is just a few miles south of Sterling Stamping.

Having helped the companies keep workers on the line despite the pandemic, the UAW has been handsomely rewarded for services rendered. Despite a slight decline in its membership over the last year, net income for the union surged by 10 percent to \$12 million, placing its net assets at over \$1 billion overall. The union has replenished its strike fund to \$790 million, even after the 40-day strike at General Motors in 2019, and has continued to use the money to sustain union officials' bloated six-figure salaries.

Infections at Sterling Stamping had been slowly declining since a peak of 25 last November. In February, there was "only" a single confirmed case in the plant, before the present surge began in March. This is in line with the trends in surrounding Macomb County, where confirmed infections peaked at 22,852 and fell to 2,342 in February, before rising again to 10,045 in March, according to county figures. However, given the excessively high test positivity rates, particularly in November, December and March, it is almost certain that this figure is a significant undercount.

Last month's surge in infections at Sterling Stamping is the largest one-month increase at the plant. Moreover, there are signs that this outbreak is still accelerating. Nine infections occurred in the first half of the month, according to the UAW's texts, compared to 19 in the second half.

One potential contributing factor behind the current outbreak may have been the decision by management to

switch to a new type of mask for the workforce at the beginning of the year. The new versions were flimsier and lower quality, produced by Stellantis subsidiary Comau, LLC, a robotics firm with no experience producing medical supplies. In contrast to readily available surgical masks and N95s, the new masks carried no safety ratings and were approved for distribution by the federal government on an emergency basis only.

After the WSWS reported on the switch, workers at the plant began requesting standard blue surgical masks, and management quietly began to shelve the substandard models.

However, the most significant factor in the outbreak is the maintenance of production in the auto industry in spite of a surge in cases, together with the elimination of much of the remaining social distancing protocols by state and federal governments. The surge in Michigan has come in the midst of a drive to reopen schools, with nearly all districts in the state now offering some form of in-person instruction. Bans on in-person dining and other social distancing measures were lifted early last month by Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who has responded to the latest surge only by setting goals to increase the state's rate of vaccinations. Yesterday afternoon, the Detroit Tigers baseball team opened their season at home in front of a crowd of 8,000 people.

Figures from the state government have consistently shown that schools and manufacturing are the two largest sources of coronavirus outbreaks. Last week, 67 new outbreaks were traced to K-12 schools, 25 to child care and youth programs, and 30 to manufacturing and construction, accounting for more than half of the total.

The auto makers are straining to keep production running as much as possible in spite of both the coronavirus pandemic and an international semiconductor shortage which has forced the idling of many auto plants. Stellantis began a three-week shutdown at Warren Truck this week, shifting chips originally bound for the plant, as well as Warren Truck temporary part-time workers, to Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, which is adjacent to Sterling Stamping. SHAP production workers have been working forced overtime for months, including both six- and even seven-day workweeks. Next week, skilled tradespeople at SHAP begin a grueling 84-hour work

schedule, 12 hours per day, seven days per week, with one week off.

The extent of infections at SHAP is not publicly known. However, the fact that the plant, which has the largest workforce of any plant in the Detroit area, has been working 50-, 60- and even 80-hour workweeks is a public health hazard, creating perfect conditions for the virus to spread in the factory and out into the surrounding community. One SHAP worker recently told the WSWS there were at least two infections in his department, with no quarantines for workers who were exposed.

While the corporate press and both the Democratic and Republican parties claim that the worst of the pandemic is over, the reality is that the reopening drive is paving the way for a new and even more deadly surge, even as vaccines are starting to become more widely available. Massive outbreaks are already underway in Latin America and Europe, and, according to a *Detroit News* report, the first case of the more contagious Brazilian variant has been discovered in Michigan.

This points to the need to shut down all nonessential industry to contain the virus, in order to stop the subordination of human lives to private profit. The *World Socialist Web Site* is helping workers to build a network of rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the unions, to demand a rational and scientifically grounded approach to combat the coronavirus.



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