

“We’ve had whole teams testing positive for COVID”

COVID-19 spreads at Stellantis Jefferson North as safety protocols break down

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With the more deadly and transmissible B.1.1.7 variant of COVID-19 surging across Michigan, an autoworker at the Stellantis/Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the rapid spread of the virus where she works.

The majority of COVID-19 outbreaks in Michigan are at schools and workplaces, according to state health officials. However, when Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued voluntary guidelines Friday calling for the suspension for two weeks of in-person high school classes, sports and in-person dining, she excluded auto plants and other nonessential industry, which are major sources of outbreaks.

JNAP in Detroit is now part of the Detroit Manufacturing Complex alongside the newly opened Mack Avenue plant. It employs 5,000 workers building the Jeep Cherokee and Dodge Durango. Stellantis has been hiring large numbers of new temporary part-time workers (TPTs) at JNAP for training as the Mack Avenue plant ramps up production.

Yolanda told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the steady breakdown and disregard by the United Auto Workers and management of the limited and inadequate safety protocols put in place when plants reopened last May. JNAP along with other North American auto plants were shut down for about two months following a wave of wildcat work stoppages last March.

“There have been so many people testing positive for COVID it is ridiculous,” she said. “Our manpower sucks. We have had to stop because of manpower shortages. We’ve had whole teams testing positive for

COVID.

“There are so many people affected. We’ve had managers and supervisors get on the line, drive the hi lo [forklift], drive the tugger, it is that bad. We have had supervisors tell workers, ‘I know you were in close contact [with someone with COVID]. But we can’t let you go home, we are low on manpower.’ That’s horrible.

“A man on the next team from me was told by a supervisor, ‘I know you were in close proximity, but we can’t let you go home. We have no one to do your job.’

“They are stopping and starting. We are literally running one line at a time. One line will go so long, and then the next line will go so long, and the next line runs so long, then we stop. We are down 10 minutes or maybe five minutes, not because of parts shortage, but because so many people are out for COVID.

“There are a couple of people that have died within the last month. There was a young lady who wanted to know if they died of COVID, but no one gave solid answers.”

She explained the Catch-22 workers face due to management’s refusal to fully compensate infected or quarantined workers. “We have had people coming to work knowing they are sick, or saying they didn’t know they had it. It went from if you test positive, everyone you were in contact with had to quarantine for X number of days. Then they went back and forth. They said, ‘If he wasn’t around this person a certain amount of time it is ok. You can go to work.’

“These employers are going to do their minimum. Now, if an employee tests positive, and they let Chrysler know with who they were in close contact and

they go out and get tested—the company does not pay you. You have to file for STD [short term disability] to get paid. That is a headache in itself.”

As a result, she said many people do not report their illness “You have people coming to work, and they are spreading it, and it is happening more and more. People are literally lying on these questionnaires and coming to work because they need the money. As much as I can be mad with them, I can understand. It is still not right, but you can put yourself in their shoes. ‘The company is not going to pay me for not coming to work if I test positive.’ What is the point of me telling the truth if I miss work? My bills are still due. I still have to provide for my family. If I file for STD, it’s still going to be some time before I see that money.’

“They force workers to lie, and they put you in an unfair position and that puts others at risk.

“It is scary. Everyone in there is fearful of catching the virus. They are putting us in harm’s way. Medical will do whatever they tell them.

“The workers need to get united and stand up. We stopped production [in March], and it worked for those two and a half months. But now it’s back to the same BS, and even worse. The government is protecting the employers, not the employees. If you go on medical for stress and anxiety because of fear you may catch the virus, they are slow to pay you, or they find a reason to not pay you.

This book compiles the most critical programmatic statements, polemics, scientific analyses, interviews, and news articles published by the World Socialist Web Site on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a social and political chronology of this world historic event based on a Marxist and Trotskyist perspective.

“The UAW [United Auto Workers] is not saying anything. One steward told a group of workers, ‘You can go home if you want to, but the union can’t make you go home.’ That’s when the supervisor had told them they were low on manpower. What kind of a response is that? People were around someone, damn near face to face with someone, who tested positive. I have children, I have a family. But, to them, the cars are more important.

“Workers are talking about how upset they are. But no union officials are saying anything. The stewards are being real hush, and people feel they have to watch what they say, because no one knows who will tell

management. If they threatened our benefits, that is a way to make people quiet, and they know that.”

She reported that instead of addressing the danger posed by COVID-19, the UAW has been focused on the rerun of the local union election now set for June, involving two equally corrupt factions who have not lifted a finger to protect workers’ lives.

“The labor board is supposed to be overseeing this election. They said election material was posted illegally. Everyone feels it is a joke.”

Remarking on the recent report that many top UAW officials received over \$200,000 in salaries last year even as COVID-19 spread in the auto plants, she said, “How do they justify that? How is that ok? Meanwhile, if we go on strike, we only get \$275 a week. That is nothing. All that money stolen by corrupt officials, but we don’t get any of that money back. Instead those guys get a pay raise. But, [convicted former UAW Vice President] Norwood Jewell makes sure his sons got jobs. Why is there no investigation of that?”

The uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 in the auto plants and the breakdown of safety protocols underscore the need to expand and build the network of rank-and-file safety committees in schools, health care and industry. Workers’ lives must not be sacrificed for corporate profit.

Workers should demand the emergency shutdown of all nonessential production, with full income protection for the duration, until the virus is contained. To enforce these demands, workers must build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of management and the unions.

For more information and to join or build a committee at your plant, sign up at wsws.org/workers.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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