

As protests halt work at Jefferson North Assembly Plant

Demand a four-week shutdown of auto plants to contain the spread of COVID-19!

The Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network
16 April 2021

The Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network will be holding an emergency meeting on Monday, April 19, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern/6:00 p.m. Central to discuss this call to action. Sign up to attend here.

With record numbers of COVID-19 cases in Michigan and infections spreading rapidly in auto plants, the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network is calling for an emergency four-week shutdown of auto plants to halt the further spread of sickness and death. We demand that all workers who are laid off continue to receive full pay until the pandemic is contained.

The situation in the Detroit area is particularly dire. Large numbers of cases are being reported at the Stellantis plants, including Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP), Sterling Heights Assembly (SHAP) and Sterling Stamping. But while massive auto plants continue to operate, Detroit school officials have voted to delay the start of in-person instruction until May 11 due to the high COVID-19 case rate.

This is unfolding as Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer has rejected the recommendation of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and health experts for lockdowns to contain the massive surge under way in the state, which is threatening to overwhelm hospital capacity. Whitmer has tried to justify this criminal policy, dictated by the auto companies and wealthy corporate interests, by insisting that workers take personal responsibility for keeping themselves and their families safe!

According to workers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*, JNAP workers in the trim department staged a protest Friday during the day shift,

halting production after a worker was sent home after testing positive for COVID-19. The job action also halted assembly lines, and the entire first shift was sent home early. So many workers are either sick or quarantined that management personnel have been brought on the line to run production.

Reports from the plant indicated that protests were continuing into Friday evening. Many workers are also reportedly using sick days and vacation days rather than coming to work to face possible infection, further stretching manpower.

Management has long abandoned the piecemeal safety protocols implemented last spring in the wake of wildcat work stoppages at the auto plants. Earlier in the week, workers in the plant protested after management failed to issue masks at the start of their shift.

A Jefferson worker told us, “We want different changes to happen now. Later on might be too late for some of us. So whatever we have to do, I am prepared. They have us in this position where your hands are tied behind your back, and it’s like getting slapped in the face and you can’t do anything about it because you need your job. I think we need to shut it down.”

Meanwhile, coronavirus is spreading out of control in Michigan auto plants. According to *Bloomberg News*, nearly 10 percent of the workforce at SHAP, or 630 workers, were out for COVID-19-related reasons on Tuesday. With the workforce at the plant stretched to the limit after months of forced overtime, workers report not being allowed to quarantine even after direct exposure to infected individuals.

A SHAP worker said, “I would [guess] that about 10 percent of the workers here have COVID. One of my coworkers told me that he went through the scanning

process at work, which said he was negative, but he wasn't feeling well. So he went to medical and was told he had no problem, and the company would not send him home. He felt so ill that he stopped at the hospital on the way home from work and was admitted—COVID positive.

“No protocols are being followed here by Stellantis. Someone tests positive, but no one who works near that person is tested or quarantined. No one is told to go home, no one in the general vicinity of those workers who test positive for COVID are even given the opportunity to protect themselves and their families.

“There's not much difference in how the pandemic is being handled by Biden compared to Trump. Where are the mandates? People are dying all around us; the stock market is rising. The whole situation is baffling to me.”

Workers report that the UAW is using threats and intimidation to prevent workers from reporting illnesses so as not to create “panic.” Meanwhile, workers who test positive for COVID-19 or quarantine, must jump through bureaucratic hoops to get paid, encouraging workers to come to work sick.

The Jefferson worker said, “Nobody's following any of the recommendations to keep everyone safe. The company wants to be open, but at whose expense? Where's my six feet? I don't care if people got the shot or not. Everyone needs to stay away from each other. We don't even have time to wash up our areas.

“The UAW is telling us not to tell anyone if we're sick! What kind of crap is that? I care about my coworkers! Some of these guys I've known for 20 years. I want my coworkers to know if I come down sick! We have to get tested!”

Another Jefferson worker described how the plants become a vector of transmission. “We're in Detroit, the hotspot of COVID right now. So we're in contact with a lot of people if we have to go to the gas station or get food, or see our family members. So we're all in contact with a lot of people.

“We need to shut it down. Take some time to try to figure out the right safety protocols. Michigan has the most cases—that right there, in and of itself, is reason enough. But then on top of that to be in a plant with other people, kids back in school, you don't know where everyone is and what they're doing—it's so easy to catch it.”

The rapid spread of the deadly and more contagious

B.1.1.7 variant of the coronavirus in Michigan prefigures a new stage of the pandemic, which will be replicated in other areas of the country unless emergency measures are taken now. The Biden administration and the ruling class have demonstrated they will not take the necessary health measures to control the pandemic because they are beholden to the corporations.

Last March, autoworkers rebelled against management-union attempts to maintain production during the first wave of the pandemic and carried out a series of wildcat strikes at plants throughout the country. This forced a two-month shutdown of the auto industry across North America, saving countless lives both in and outside of the plants.

Today, as was the case a year ago, only the independent action of workers can save lives.

The Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network demands:

- Given the dangerous conditions with the unchecked spread of COVID-19, all auto plants must be shut down for four weeks until vaccinations become available and the pandemic is under control as determined by independent health experts.

- All workers on layoff must receive full income while shutdowns continue without red tape and delays.

- We call for the expansion of independent rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-company UAW to organize the fight to save lives.

- Unite autoworkers with teachers, Amazon workers, logistics and health care workers to demand a science-based approach to fight the pandemic, including the shutdown of nonessential production. Organize a collective struggle to prioritize human life over corporate profit.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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