

# Workers describe UAW-management cover-up of coronavirus outbreak at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant

Shannon Jones  
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Workers at Detroit-area auto plants are increasingly concerned with management and the United Auto Workers' prioritization of production over health and safety, in spite of record levels of coronavirus infections in the state of Michigan.

State health officials reported 9,251 newly reported cases and 65 deaths on Tuesday, bringing the statewide total up to 882,436 cases and 17,987 deaths. Hospitalizations are now at the highest level since the start of the pandemic.

According to a report by *Bloomberg*, last Tuesday 630 workers at the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit were out with COVID or in quarantine, almost 10 percent of the workforce. Workers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* say that management at the plant is attempting to cover up the number of infections and refusing to notify in a timely manner any worker who has been exposed.

The high absentee rate has made conditions at the plant even more difficult and dangerous as management, with the full support of the UAW, tries to maintain production of the best-selling Ram 1500 pickup truck. Staffing shortages have hit the skilled trades very hard, where a grueling 12-hour seven-day work schedule went into effect earlier this month.

A skilled trades worker described the conditions at SHAP since the start of the 12/7 regime to the *Autoworker Newsletter*.

"We've had several cases in the trades here. The most recent is a maintenance supervisor testing positive, and although he is continuously in close contact with the tradesmen he oversees, none of those employees were even informed that their supervisor

had tested positive. Then, two or three days after this, another tradesman tested positive, after being at work the entire shift and not feeling well himself. He was told that it was not COVID, and if it was, he got it on the outside, not in the plant.

"So now we have seven to 10 tradesmen out for contact tracing, this after the company just forced us into an AWS work pattern that reduced skilled trades' manpower. This added workload for the remaining tradesmen covering those COVID absences, on top of the newly forced 12-hour days is just too much.

"And people on the other crews are still angry about being forced into this work pattern and are turning down offers for overtime to cover these absences. Thus, we're being forced to now do multiple jobs, covering multiple areas of the plant, with one half to one third of the manpower needed to run.

"The fact that the union has said nothing, refusing to answer calls or emails from its membership, paints a pretty good picture as to their true colors, an issue all are sure to remember come election time, if not pulling our dues before that in disgust. If they're not representing our best interests, our health and safety, and with COVID rampant in the plants, our families' health and safety as well ... then why give them a nickel of our money?"

Another skilled trades worker said, "The problem with the whole operation is that contact tracing is nonexistent. If it was being carried out, the whole plant would be shut down. They wouldn't have enough people to run production.

"They are not telling workers if they came in contact with anyone with COVID. They are not disclosing information. We only find out through the grapevine.

“Now they are raising HIPAA privacy laws as an excuse for this. I don’t need to know the name, I just need to be alerted that I was in contact with someone who tested positive or who is out for COVID. No different than HIV or any other case. All you need to know is you are exposed and then you can start going through your contacts. But they are not telling us anything.

“A friend told me that at his GM plant they send out an email every day saying which area there were COVID cases. We don’t even get that.

“They make us wear a mask at work, but people are still getting sick at work. If that is the problem, that people are not exercising their personal responsibility, that’s why you should shut it down. Now you are saying you are not going to protect us from ourselves?”

He said other minimal safety protocols had gone by the wayside. “They went from them giving us masks we thought were good to ones that we know aren’t.”

He added, “There is no way to know if these temperature checks actually work. How do I know if they give me the thumbs up? ... They are looking at the phone and giving me the thumbs up. It is just a show.”

The conditions at SHAP are being replicated at other auto plants. At the Detroit Assembly Complex—Jefferson Assembly, workers on the trim line stopped production Friday afternoon over an incident where a worker tested positive for COVID-19. By making it difficult for workers to collect compensation while out sick or on quarantine, management is encouraging workers not to report symptoms or get tested.

A worker at the Stellantis Kokomo, Indiana, transmission complex told a meeting of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network on Monday, “We don’t have what we need to stay safe. They are playing roulette with our lives. All they want is numbers.

“The union is almost like management. They don’t care what we think. It is almost like talking to the wall. We pay union dues but don’t know where the money goes. Don’t check the dates when you enter. They just let anyone in through the gates.”

Under these conditions, the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network is demanding a four-week shutdown of the auto industry, with full compensation for laid-off workers to help bring the

spiraling pandemic under control. For more information, including how to form a committee at your plant, contact [autoworkers@wsws.org](mailto:autoworkers@wsws.org).



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