More than 550 autoworkers out due to COVID-19 at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant

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At Stellantis' Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit, 556 autoworkers were out at the end of last week due to exposure to COVID-19, United Auto Workers Local 1700 announced Friday on its monthly podcast. According to the union, 498 workers were out on either short- or long-term medical leave.

This means that the number of workers currently out due to infection or exposure at SHAP is at least 7 percent of the total workforce of 7,803. In other words, a massive outbreak has been underway at the plant for some time, amid a near-total blackout from the media, and is only now being acknowledged by the UAW.

The outbreak is apparently so serious that even the plant's onsite doctor has tested positive, according to workers. "Think of all the people who would have been in his office," said one worker.

The revelation comes after the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* reported last month, on the basis of a review of text alerts sent to the workforce, of a major outbreak in March at Sterling Stamping Plant, located across the street from SHAP. It also follows a report last month in Bloomberg that almost 10 percent of SHAP's workforce was out due to COVID-related issues at one point earlier in the month.

The sharp increase in infections in the two plants coincides with a major upsurge throughout the state of Michigan. While the primary driver of the surge appears to have been the reopening of public schools by Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, there can be little doubt that the maintenance of production in the plants has also contributed significantly to community transmission. According to the state, manufacturing and construction sites have more ongoing outbreaks (232) than any other setting at present, even more than public schools, and an additional 26 outbreaks were recorded at these locations for the most recent reporting week.

Sterling Heights, a suburb of Detroit, saw a massive surge last month of 3,048 new infections, falling just shy of the record monthly total it set in November. The test positivity rate throughout Macomb County was a staggering 20.9 percent, meaning official totals are almost certainly a substantial undercount.

Meanwhile, vaccination figures in Michigan are beginning to taper off well below the thresholds cited by medical experts as needed for herd immunity. The percentage of the population with at least one dose increased by a mere 1.7 percentage points to 50.4 percent between April 24 and May 1, compared to a 4.4 percentage point increase over a one-week span at the end of March.

In his opening remarks on the podcast, Local 1700 President Louie Pahl sought to downplay and minimize the outbreak at SHAP, absurdly claiming that the figures were "deceiving" because there was at least a partial overlap between the count of workers on quarantine and those on medical leave.

The most remarkable admission, however, came when Pahl let slip that the UAW is receiving daily infection and exposure updates from Stellantis' labor department via the plant's shop chairman each morning. Autoworkers report, however, that they have been given hardly any information on the spread of the virus from the union. In the podcast, Pahl suggested that figures were reported only once a month on the podcast and during the local union meeting, which itself has been moved to Zoom due to the danger of coronavirus.

In other words, the UAW is being provided with regular, detailed updates from management on the spread of coronavirus and is deliberately concealing this information from workers. This is hardly unique to

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SHAP, however. Last fall, a leaked memo at Stellantis' Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit revealed that the UAW had covered up 59 infections and two deaths at that plant.

Pahl did not say how many workers are seriously ill, have been hospitalized or are on ventilators. Nor is the true death toll at the plant publicly known. However, at least five SHAP workers had died of COVID-19 as of last November.

At that time, Pahl took to the union's podcast to order workers, who were learning of the real state of the virus in the plant from the *World Socialist Web Site*, not to read the WSWS or, for that matter, anything on social media.

Pahl made clear in last week's podcast that the union would work as hard as it could to keep workers on the job. At one point, he instructed workers to keep their contact information up to date on the company's internal systems so that quarantined workers can be promptly contacted when they have been cleared to return, so that workers "are not out longer than they need to be."

In fact, the level of infections at SHAP has been all but inevitable given the breakneck pace at which the plant has operated for much of this year. Production workers have been working six days a week for months, and skilled trades last month began a grueling new 84-hour "alternative work schedule." Meanwhile, temporary part-time workers from plants which have been hit with production lulls due to the global semiconductor shortage have been shifted over to SHAP, creating the potential for cross-plant transmission of the virus.

It is highly significant that after a wildcat strike wave forced a two-month shutdown to production last year, the only sustained stoppages in the industry subsequently have been due to the chip shortages. The auto plants are idling due to lack of parts, but not because of the deadly virus ripping through the workforce, who the companies and the UAW deem replaceable.

In fact, management currently has teams fanning out throughout the plant looking for more jobs to cut, even as they have pushed workers to the point of exhaustion. Pahl's co-host on the podcast, local Vice President Gill Mack, frankly admitted that job cuts would be particularly severe this year after the Fiat Chrysler-Peugeot merger, as the new management looks for ways to cut costs.

The UAW bureaucrats merely shrugged their shoulders, claiming that they had no say over these job losses, advising workers not to give management an "excuse" to eliminate their positions.

On the shortage, Pahl called SHAP "essentially the last plant standing" even as many other plants have been forced to carry out layoffs or temporarily shut down altogether. "They [Stellantis] are limiting production at all the other facilities to keep us going," he said. Stellantis is pulling out all of the stops to keep SHAP, which produces the highly profitable Ram 1500 pickup truck, operating no matter the cost to workers' health and lives.

This will inevitably produce more deaths, not only due to COVID-19, but from industrial accidents as workers battle impossible quotas, chaos and disorganization inside the plant. This has already happened across the street at Sterling Stamping, where crane operator Terry Garr tragically died during a die set last month.

The situation at SHAP underscores the need for a four-week emergency shutdown of the auto industry to contain the spread of the virus and fight the reckless regime of speedup imposed by the companies with the support of the UAW.

To fight for such a shutdown, however, autoworkers must take matters into their own hands. The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* is helping autoworkers construct a network of rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the UAW, at plants across the country.

To join or for help forming a committee at your plant, contact us via the form at wsws.org/workers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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