

Chicago Ford workers face hardship after eight weeks on layoff due to chip shortage

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Workers at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant have faced significant hardship during the eight-week shutdown of the factory due to the global shortage of critical computer semiconductor chips. The plant's 5,700 hourly workers have been on temporary layoff since April 12. The plant builds the Ford Explorer, the Police Interceptor Utility, and the Lincoln Aviator. Currently, production is set to resume on a reduced schedule starting the week of June 7.

During the layoff workers were supposed to have received roughly 75 percent of their regular pay through state unemployment aid and company-administered Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB pay). However, workers complained of delays in receiving these benefits. In addition, temporary workers are not even eligible for SUB under terms of contracts negotiated by the United Auto Workers and must rely on totally inadequate state unemployment benefits.

Operating on the just-in-time supply chain model, Ford and other automakers had no stockpile of chips and thus were not prepared for the disruption caused by the pandemic. As in all aspects of the pandemic, autoworkers have been forced to bear the brunt of the impact of the lack of planning and international cooperation endemic under capitalism. Even as work partially resumes at CAP, Stellantis is moving to cut half of its workforce at its Belvidere Assembly Plant near Rockford, Illinois on June 1.

Autoworkers at CAP and other assembly plants contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* expressed their frustration with loss of income they have faced due to the layoffs.

A longtime worker at CAP said, "We get paid 75 percent of our [regular] pay. I think it's hard for every person here. Most people didn't get any pay for five weeks. Money is very much on the short side. But when we do go back to work full time, you better have your running shoes," he added, anticipating efforts to speed up

the lines to make up for lost production.

A forklift driver at CAP said, "I have a dependent and I'm getting the max, but it's still \$400 less than what I'm used to making. I'm glad to get a break, too, but I hate not being able to save. I was in the process of buying a house, [but I] ended up losing the house because I didn't qualify for financing while on unemployment."

A Ford Kansas City worker expressed solidarity with the Chicago Assembly workers. Workers at Ford's Kansas City Assembly Plant, who build the Ford F-150 truck, are also temporarily laid off through the weeks of May 31 and June 7 and are expected to resume work on a reduced schedule the week of June 14.

"I've talked to workers here who are laid off at my plant and say they aren't sure how they are going to survive because their unemployment checks don't cover their bills. I tell them, 'There needs to be a better way. The union is not going to help us. We have to come together and form a committee because the ruling class is not going to let up.'"

Moves are now afoot in Illinois to eliminate the \$300 weekly federal supplement to state unemployment benefits. Earlier this month Illinois Manufacturers' Association President and CEO Mark Denzler sent a letter to Democratic Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, imploring him to end the enhanced COVID-19 unemployment benefits, which currently aren't set to expire until September 6. Business leaders claim the supplement is serving as a deterrent to workers re-entering the labor market. Denzler also asked the governor to reinstate work search requirements.

Denzler also complains about what he describes as "a perception problem that manufacturing is dirty and dangerous."

But manufacturing plants are often dirty and unsafe. At CAP, workers frequently have to deal with the rat infestation that plagues the plant. Giant manufacturing

facilities are also vectors for the transmission of COVID-19. It is not known precisely how many workers have been infected with COVID-19 at CAP, or how many deaths can be traced back to in-plant infections as a result of Ford's prioritization of profits over workers health and safety during the pandemic.

According to the Cook County Medical Examiner, over 5,200 people have died from COVID-19 in the city of Chicago, with hundreds of coronavirus deaths recorded in the neighborhoods adjacent to the far south side Hegewisch neighborhood where the Ford plant is located. Countless workers and their families have been forced to risk their health and lives to keep the revenues of the auto companies afloat during the pandemic while they are asked to tighten their belts during the semiconductor shortage.

Meanwhile, UAW executives have seen no reduction to their six-figure salaries despite the layoffs. UAW Local 551, which covers CAP workers, sits on \$2.2 million in total assets and collected \$4.4 million in dues and agency fees last year. While most autoworkers make poverty wages, the Treasurer of Local 551 Steve Roman took in \$114,000 last year.

The UAW has indicated that it is considering supporting the abandonment of mask requirements in the plants, saying in a recent statement, "We are working to clearly understand these new CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines and coordinating with the companies." Masking and other limited and inadequate safety protocols were only implemented last year after autoworkers at key plants in the US, Canada and Mexico staged wildcat work stoppages over the lack of COVID safety protections. Now the last of these wholly inadequate measures will likely soon be scrapped.

The CDC's anti-scientific and politically motivated claim that it is safe to lift mask mandates is contradicted by their own data, which shows that only 40.2 percent of Americans are fully vaccinated. On Saturday, Illinois public health officials reported an additional 802 COVID-19 cases and 37 COVID deaths, bringing the total number of cases to 1,381,063 and the total number of deaths to 22,776 in the state since the start of the pandemic. The new strains of the virus are also more transmissible and pose risks to even those who are vaccinated.

In last year's founding statement of the Ford Chicago Assembly Rank-and-File Safety Committee, CAP workers demanded the most rigorous protection from the virus, and they insisted that their "health and lives are

more important than Ford's profits."

Autoworkers need a coordinated international strategy to fight the multinational auto companies for safety and better wages. Multinational corporations like Ford cannot be fought on a nationalist or local basis.

The layoffs over the chip shortage take place amid a rising tide of worker militancy. Volvo Truck workers in Dublin, Virginia are fighting to oppose the UAW-Volvo sellout agreement. Ford workers in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu staged a sit-in protest on Thursday to shut down production and demand leave and health benefits as the deadly coronavirus surge ravages the country. Hyundai and Nissan autoworkers in India shut down plants in India over safety as well.

The demands of not just Ford workers in the US and India, but all autoworkers everywhere, cannot be won as long as workers' struggles are isolated by the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions. The wealth of society is created by workers and must be put under the control of rank-and-file workers themselves on the basis of production for human need, not private profit.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties are committed to fighting for the international unity of the working class in the struggle against the capitalist system, which subordinates every human need to the anarchy of private profit. The formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will facilitate the coordinated political struggle of, by, and for the world's workers to secure the social rights of all.

If you are an autoworker at Chicago Assembly or elsewhere, contact the WSWWS Autoworker Newsletter today to join an existing rank-and-file committee at your plant or to build one.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact