

Stellantis relaxes workplace safety protocols as COVID-19 Delta variant spreads

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Global carmaker Stellantis says that it is dropping temperature screening at its US auto plants starting Monday along with the relaxation of other limited COVID-19 related safety protocols put in place last year in the wake of wildcat job actions by autoworkers concerned by the unchecked spread of the deadly virus.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, hundreds of autoworkers have been infected by COVID-19 and scores have died, although the actual number of deaths is unknown due to the cover-up of data by the car companies in collusion with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. In many cases workers have only become aware of deaths through Facebook or through second- and third-hand sources.

According to a memo distributed by Stellantis management, along with temperature checks, ten-minute cleaning times before shifts as well staggering shift times to prevent thousands of workers from filing past one another, are also ending. Mask wearing is being continued, at least for the present time. Self-reporting of possible COVID-19 symptoms will also continue.

The elimination of a range of safety protocols is clearly a step toward the elimination of all COVID-related safety measures, in particular the self-quarantine of workers exposed to COVID-19, seen by management as a drain on production and profits. The auto companies have refused to recognize the transmission of COVID-19 inside the plants and have bitterly resisted paying sick leave benefits to workers infected or exposed to the virus. This has led to a situation in which symptomatic workers have felt intense pressure to cover up their illness and report to work in order to get paid, increasing the danger to others. The latest measures announced by Stellantis are aimed at further ramping up the pressure.

In announcing the elimination of its safety protocols, Stellantis provided no figures on the number of cases at its plants or the percentage of workers who are fully vaccinated. As recently as April, plants such as Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, north of Detroit, had hundreds of workers infected or out on quarantine. The announcement by Stellantis comes as the highly contagious and more deadly Delta variant of COVID-19 has been detected in Michigan, the center of Stellantis production in the US. To date, there have been nearly 900,000 confirmed cases and 20,000 deaths in Michigan.

The elimination of all safety measures is clearly being planned. In fact, Volkswagen has announced that it is eliminating its masking requirements on June 21 at its US plants, the first carmaker to do so. A number of auto parts suppliers have already moved to eliminate masking requirements.

A worker at the Detroit Manufacturing Complex-Mack reported that the scheduling changes by Stellantis related to dropping safety measures will add 40 minutes of production to each shift because of the elimination of 10-minute cleanup time and half-hours set aside to stagger shifts.

As it currently stands, the worker reported, the first shift ends at 2 p.m., but the second shift does not come in until 2:30, then has 10 minutes for cleanup—a total of 40 minutes of lost production. Starting Monday, the afternoon shift will now start at 2 p.m. with no stagger and no cleanup.

Assuming a three-shift, eight-hour schedule, the changes amount to an added 120 minutes of production per day of operation, or two hours.

The United Auto Workers had no immediate reaction to the announcement by Stellantis management. In a statement on June 9, the COVID-19 Joint Task Force

comprised of the UAW, Ford, Stellantis and General Motors said it was recommending the continuation for now of some existing safety protocols, including masking, “out of an abundance of caution.” However, the UAW-management task force said temperature screenings at facility entrances would be phased out “along with other minor adjustments to entry and exit procedures.” The state of Michigan has fallen in line behind the ill-advised recommendation of the US Centers for Disease Control that masking requirements be dropped in most settings for vaccinated individuals.

Since there is no way to tell who is vaccinated and who not, these guidelines mean an effective end to most masking requirements. States across the country, including California and New York, have now ended virtually all COVID-19 related health restrictions, guaranteeing the continued spread of the virus and death under conditions where genuine herd immunity has been nowhere achieved in the US. Some rural areas have vaccination rates of less than 30 percent.

A former Stellantis worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, “My teammates sent text messages saying that they are not comfortable with the changes, seeing as everyone has not been vaccinated. We know it’s all about the money.”

The delay by automakers in collaboration with the UAW in implementing the CDC recommendation to end mask requirements and other health measures has nothing to do with an “abundance of caution” over protecting workers’ lives.

Indeed, at every point in the pandemic, the auto companies, with the support of the UAW, have prioritized profits over lives. This was apparent to autoworkers from the start. As COVID-19 cases spread rapidly in March 2020, autoworkers in Europe and North America staged a series of wildcat job actions demanding a shutdown of nonessential production. Workers at several Detroit-area Fiat Chrysler/Stellantis factories initiated work stoppages in defiance of the UAW.

As a result, all major automakers were forced to declare a temporary halt to operations. Production only resumed two months later, despite the continued spread of the pandemic, through the collaboration of the UAW and the use of threats and lies. This included the implementation of a series of inadequate safety protocols. Despite this, many workers opted to stay

home rather than risk infection in the factories. All the automakers have experienced difficulty finding adequate numbers of temporary workers willing to risk infection for the paltry \$16.67 starting wages paid by the Detroit automakers.

Given this mood of opposition, auto companies are proceeding cautiously with eliminating remaining safety measures. However, moves to eliminate even cosmetic safety measures will follow in due course. Management can be sure in advance they will face no opposition from the UAW.

The disregard of health and safety despite the continued threat posed by COVID-19 and the spread of deadly new variants adds renewed urgency to the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-And-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The IWA-RFC will fight to unify the international working class against the policies of the corporations and governments that prioritize profits over human lives. This is bound up with the development of a socialist political movement of the working class directed at putting an end to the capitalist profit system.



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