

United Auto Workers union announces end to mask requirements in auto plants

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On Tuesday, the United Auto Workers union announced it would be ending mask requirements for vaccinated autoworkers beginning July 12. The announcement came after a meeting of the COVID-19 Joint Task Force, composed of representatives from the UAW, General Motors, Ford and Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler Automobiles).

The move will almost certainly increase infections both in the plants and in surrounding communities in the coming weeks and months. In the state of Michigan, factories and construction sites have consistently ranked among the top sources of outbreaks over the course of the pandemic, behind schools and day care facilities. As recently as March and April, massive outbreaks took place at Stellantis' Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) and Sterling Stamping Plant. At one point, more than 10 percent of SHAP's workforce of 7,000 was out at the same due to exposure, and at least one Sterling Stamping worker, Mark Bruce, died of COVID-19.

The move to end mask requirements comes amid disturbing signs of the spread of the new Delta variant of the disease, which is far more infectious than previous variants, with some infections occurring after only seconds of exposure. The World Health Organization is now recommending that people who have already been vaccinated continue to wear masks because of the potential for the spread of the Delta variant. It is already fueling a rapid rise of cases in the United Kingdom, even though that country has among the highest vaccination rates in the world.

The task force's decision is in line with US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines issued last month. However, these guidelines are being exposed by the new variant as a politically-motivated distortion of the science aimed at both eliminating all remaining restrictions on economic activity and fueling a false propaganda narrative that the pandemic is "over." It served as a signal for state after state, controlled by both Democratic and Republican governors, to end social distancing measures.

Earlier this month, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer held a press conference at Belle Isle State Park in Detroit to announce an end to the state's restrictions. "Effective today, there are no more capacity limits, indoors or outdoors. Effective today, our pure Michigan summer is back," Whitmer said.

The announcement comes only eight days after the auto companies and the UAW ended a raft of COVID-19-related safety measures in the plants, including temperature checks, staggered shift times and 10-minute cleaning periods. When the UAW-company task force had announced the previous measures, it said that it would maintain mandatory masks "out of an abundance of caution."

This "abundance" apparently ran out after only a few days. It is likely that the task force had always intended to eliminate mask requirements as well but feared that ending too many restrictions at once would be too provocative.

In a statement released Tuesday, the UAW said, "While the UAW and the companies continue following the protocols that have kept our workplaces safe, we know that one of the best ways to fight this virus is by getting vaccinated. The Task Force continues to encourage everyone to roll up their sleeves and get vaccinated against COVID-19 so that we can protect our sisters and brothers and their families." In plain English, the UAW will do nothing to protect workers against the spread of the virus in factories where workers say 50 percent or more of their co-workers remain unvaccinated.

The announcement also came only one day after the union's International Executive Board announced it would appoint Ray Curry, currently secretary-treasurer and head of the union's Heavy Trucks Department, to succeed Rory Gamble, who is retiring. Curry has been the point man for the UAW's isolation of the struggle by Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, who have been on strike since June 7. Curry negotiated two sellout deals and intervened personally in an unsuccessful bid to bully workers into accepting them. The workers voted down the deals by more than a 9-1 margin.

The winding up of remaining safety measures in the auto plants, as inadequate as they always were, is being dictated by the profit motive of the auto companies, who are under intense pressure due to the global chip shortage and the impact the pandemic has had on sales. One autoworker calculated that the elimination of staggered shifts and cleaning breaks alone will give the companies an additional two hours of production time each day.

The Detroit automakers are also attempting to keep pace with international competitors, who have already dropped mask requirements in their plants in the American South. Toyota, Nissan, BMW, Volvo Cars and Hyundai already allow vaccinated workers to forgo masks, according to Reuters.

The COVID-19 Joint Task Force is a further demonstration of the corporatist, anti-worker character of the UAW. Formed in March 2020, its first act was to cobble together a framework to keep production going throughout the initial surge of the virus that spring. Workers revolted against this agreement by carrying out wildcat strikes throughout the country, staggering the UAW and the companies and forcing them to retreat and shut production for two months. By acting outside the control of the “labor-management partnership” of the UAW, autoworkers saved countless lives in the critical early days and weeks of the pandemic.

However, the task force bided its time and eventually reopened the plants that May. Since then, the UAW and the auto companies have been carrying out a massive coverup of the extent of infections and deaths in the auto plants. While even low-wage employer Amazon admitted last October that 20,000 of its workers had been infected (it has released no figures since then, however), no similar nationwide figures have been published for the auto industry. The number of deaths, however, almost certainly numbers in the dozens at least. Many individual plants have seen multiple deaths, including six at Stellantis’ Warren Truck Assembly Plant alone.

Autoworkers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* responded with anger to the announcement. The plant is a “covid laboratory,” one Warren Truck worker said. “Cleaning is all contracted out, and they only clean the pressroom and change the garbage. They don’t even clean any workstations unless there is an outbreak. But they are so secretive about it that you never even hear about it.”

“Many have not yet even been vaccinated inside of the plant,” he said, “It seems like the purpose of this move is to sow division within the workforce. And people who aren’t vaccinated yet may decide to simply stop wearing masks. Infections will rise because of this. Even people who are already vaccinated can still carry the virus and spread it.”

“They don’t care about public health, it’s crazy,” said a worker at General Motors’ Wentzville, Missouri, plant, near St. Louis. She said that most of the plant has been idled since the end of May, but would begin returning around the middle of July, when the mask requirements are lifted.

“I’m wearing my mask. I don’t give a hell. I know there will be some people who won’t get vaccinated and won’t wear a mask. They’re saying that the variant is down here in Missouri, it’s coming from southwest and moving towards St. Louis. You think the cases are blowing up now in the state, well, they’re really going to blow up.”

A worker at Ford’s Kansas City Assembly Plant said, “It’s twisted. I read yesterday about the Delta variant spreading in Missouri. But the governor is really pushing people to go to work. He doesn’t want anyone to get federal unemployment funding. They already ended it, even though the prices of everything are going up, like gas and food.”

A worker from Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea. People think that this virus is over, but it’s not. My wife and I are fully vaccinated. But how will Ford know that people are? Unless you show the card they give you after the shot, that’s the only way that I would trust anyone. We still wear our masks. Ford doesn’t do anything to anyone who doesn’t wear one now, so what’s the point? I stay away from anyone who doesn’t wear one now.”

The UAW’s announcement underscores the need for autoworkers to organize themselves independently of both the companies and their paid agents in the union, by expanding the network of rank-and-file safety committees that was formed last summer. These committees insist that safety, not profits, must be the overriding priority, and that all measures related to the pandemic, including the shutdown of plants when necessary, be controlled by workers themselves, with the advice of trusted medical health experts.



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