

As pandemic resurges, auto parts maker Faurecia drops mask mandates

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As of Monday the top auto parts manufacturing corporation in North America removed its mask mandates nationwide in the US declaring workers who are vaccinated will no longer be required to wear a mask. Workers who are vaccinated will need to show proof and receive a sticker to go on the back of their ID badges.

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* were skeptical that the requirement for unvaccinated workers to wear a mask would be enforced and denounced the policy. On the contrary, they said, the new directive will provide the company with a pretext to eliminate safety precautions as a huge spike of cases of the highly infectious Delta variant takes hold across the country.

A supporter of the rank-and-file safety committee at the Gladstone plant in Columbus, Indiana, that manufactures exhaust systems for all the major car companies, as well as truck and heavy equipment makers John Deere, Cummins and Volvo, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The way the company sees it, masking is taking away from their profit. We in the plant have no way of knowing who has the virus and who doesn’t,” he said. “I have read reports that even vaccinated people can be carriers and give it to others.”

A process tech at the big Faurecia factory in Saline, Michigan, spoke to the WSWs yesterday. “They do not have any sanitation provisions around the plant,” she said. “In the beginning they had the gap leaders cleaning and sanitizing on breaks, but they have not done that for months.

“After a week, that sticker will not matter because nothing stays consistent and nothing is followed through,” she continued. “On top of that we have black particles in the air and covering everything we touch.”

More than 600,000 Americans have died from

COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a spike of infections driven by the Delta variant is surging across the United States. The federal agency is now categorizing the US as having “high” community transmission in which 62 percent of counties are reporting high (43.79 percent) or substantial (18.17 percent) transmission. And the spike is accelerating: just four weeks ago only 8 percent of counties had high transmission.

Other workers from Saline were outraged by the conditions that have developed during the pandemic and especially since a rooftop electrical transformer erupted in flames, forcing evacuation of the facility at the end of June. The factory that was formerly operated by Ford Motor Company produces door panels, doors, dashboards and other interior parts for Ford, Tesla and Stellantis and is among the largest such facilities in North America employing roughly 2,000 workers.

The Saline plant is notorious for its high rate of turnover, replacing roughly half the workforce annually in a process driven by low pay and abusive working conditions. A new hire makes about \$14.00 an hour when a process tech at full pay receives \$24.00. Thus the revolving door is a deliberate policy to hold down labor costs.

Since taking over the operation in 2012, the French-based manufacturer, now ranked eighth among global auto parts producers and first in North America, has conducted a ruthless drive to increase profits for its investors by cutting wages and destroying jobs, health and safety conditions.

Last winter when workers discovered that company management was, with the full complicity of the United Auto Workers, concealing the spread of infection and death from COVID-19 among their fellow workers, they formed a rank-and-file committee to fight for

safety on an independent basis and link up with workers at other factories through the pages of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

A recent meeting of the committee brought together new photographs and other information about developing conditions at the plant.

The latest concern involves porta-potties that have been used by the company in place of restrooms that appear to have been damaged at the time of the fire.

A worker reported that the facilities that workers are supposed to use are “so filthy and nasty” that she must spend an extra 15 to 20 minutes at break times just to find a decent place to go to the bathroom. “They are very, very old,” she added.

Apparently the multibillion-dollar corporation has rented the cheapest replacement it could find and is refusing to provide proper maintenance. The restroom designated to serve the west wing of the plant has been closed. “There is no place for you to wash your hands,” she continued. “And some of them do not have toilet paper.”

Furthermore, the potties are overflowing, she said. “For three days straight they have not been emptied.” And to make matters worse, the company placed them in the sun when they could have been put in the shade, and the contents are “baking.”

A co-worker responded that the site must be rife with disease because they have created “perfect conditions for bacteria to grow.”

Company safety officers, as well as local union officials, have ignored multiple complaints about an acute mold hazard at the main entrance that workers must pass through to enter the plant.

Because of company procedures implemented during COVID-19, there is a one way in/one way out system in which all workers must pass through a long basement hallway to have their temperatures checked.

“When you go through that hallway, the air is really thick from the mold,” a co-worker reported. “You can definitely smell that heavy odor of mold.”

He explained that the company could open multiple doors but has refused to do so apparently because of the additional cost of bringing in more people to service them.

Two rooms known as a computer lab and old break room in the vicinity of the entrance hall are used by the company for new hires to fill out applications. Both are

full of mold on the plumbing pipes, walls and ceilings.

The source of the contamination is no secret. Poor ventilation and wet conditions encourage the growth of mold. The factory is notorious for multiple roof leaks. Workers describe storm water pouring down on the factory floor any time it rains.

Workers scoffed at the flimsy paper masks that are distributed by the company during the pandemic, comparing them to the hazmat suits and respirators that are required to remediate mold.

Under conditions of a spike of COVID-19 infections, the threat of mold contamination is all the more dangerous because like viruses, mold spores are airborne and can produce life-threatening respiratory illness.

A co-worker with medical training explained that black mold is terrible. “It can cause all kinds of issues,” she said, “including, cancer, asthma, COPD, virtually any disease that attacks your lungs.”

Her colleague agreed. “They don’t care if we get sick and die,” he said. “They only care about their equipment. The only time they do anything about our conditions is when there is a death in the plant. They do not take safety seriously—only profit.”

The workers agreed that the union had long since gone over to the side of management. A worker who had hired in at the Saline plant more than a decade ago summed up the feelings of many in the meeting when he spoke about his aspirations of getting a well-paid job with good conditions and benefits.

“You believe in something,” he said. “And you find out you have been duped, robbed. You can’t do anything about it unless you are in a rank-and-file committee like this one.”



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