

United Auto Workers and auto companies reverse course, reimpose mask mandate in factories

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Amid the explosive spread of the Delta variant across the United States, Detroit-based automakers and the United Auto Workers said they will reinstate masking requirements in auto plants. The announcement reverses the policy change instituted several weeks ago that allowed vaccinated individuals not to wear masks in the auto factories.

The announcement by Detroit automakers and the UAW follows the move by Ford and General Motors to reinstate mask mandates at facilities in Missouri, an epicenter of the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant.

The elimination of mask requirements in the auto factories in June was justified by reference to new politically motivated guidelines from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which claimed that only non-vaccinated people should still wear masks. For weeks, the Biden administration, the Democratic Party, the corporate media and the unions had been falsely trumpeting the virtual end of the pandemic. The aim of this campaign was to remove whatever public health restrictions remained which impacted economic activity, sacrificing health and lives for profit.

On July 4th, Biden gave a speech telling people, “take your mask off, you’ve earned it.” Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer held a similar press conference at Belle Isle Park in Detroit in late June, in which she declared, “Effective today, there are no more capacity limits, indoors or outdoors. Effective today, our pure Michigan summer is back.”

These statements have now been exposed as lies. Last Friday, daily cases in the United States surpassed 100,000 for the first time since February, according to Worldometer. Moreover, a leaked report from the CDC has revealed that in contrast to public statements from the Biden administration, vaccines, while providing better

protection, are by no means a guarantee against infection, with more than 35,000 “breakthrough” cases detected each week in the US. This has generated enormous anger among workers, who rightly feel they have been lied to and put at risk.

The CDC has since reversed itself, issuing new guidelines encouraging workers to wear face masks at job sites in areas of “high” or “substantial” COVID-19 spread, regardless of vaccination status.

On July 31, about 79 percent of US counties were in this category, according to the CDC’s data tracker, with the South the most concentrated area of spread, but with significant spread in northern industrial states as well.

According to the CDC, as of Monday more than half of the counties in Michigan, the center of US auto production, were in areas of high or substantial coronavirus transmission. Last week only 10 counties in Michigan were in those categories.

Meanwhile, Governor Whitmer restated her opposition to reinstating any masking or social distancing requirements in the state, insisting that the spread of COVID-19 is entirely the responsibility unvaccinated individuals.

In recommending wearing masks, the CDC pointed to breakthrough cases among vaccinated individuals, who can spread the disease even with few or no symptoms.

The decision to reinstate masking requirements in auto plants was issued by the COVID-19 Joint Task Force, a corporatist body set up in March 2020 by the companies and the UAW. Its first act was to cook up a deal to keep workers in the factories during the crucial initial weeks of the pandemic, a deal which was torpedoed by the resistance of workers themselves by wildcat strikes which forced a two-month shutdown of the industry.

During the shutdown, the UAW worked behind the

scenes to prepare to reopen the plants by elaborating out a series of inadequate safety protocols including masking, cleaning, testing and quarantining, which have not prevented massive outbreaks inside the factories. However, almost as soon as they were announced, management began reneging on these safety measures in the interests of maintaining full production.

The purpose of the Task Force since reopening has been to downplay and minimize the danger of infections inside the plants while the companies forces autoworkers to work massive levels of overtime to make up for lost revenue. It has not released any information on the actual spread of the disease inside the plants or the number of workers who have died, in what amounts to a union-company cover up.

In a statement Tuesday, the UAW declared, “The Task Force met and, after reviewing the recently changed CDC guidelines and community COVID-19 trends, decided it is best for worker safety to resume wearing masks in all worksites.” It continued, “While we know that masks can be uncomfortable, the spread of the Delta variant and recent data outlining the alarmingly high rate of transmission among those unvaccinated is a serious health threat.”

A worker at the Stellantis Jeep complex in Toledo, Ohio, who wished to remain anonymous, told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, “If you go out for exposure, and have no symptoms, Human Resources is telling people you can come back without taking a test.” He added that Human Resources is telling workers “that if you test positive, they don't want you to tell anyone, and that if you're cleared for having no symptoms, you're allowed to come back without getting a negative test.”

He added, “Meanwhile, our entire union committee is currently out for exposure,” after one UAW official tested positive. “But they didn't tell anyone who went into the committee room and may have been exposed who it was or that they were even exposed.”

The UAW statement on re-masking evoked many angry posts on Facebook from workers, many confused and angry about the sudden reversal. One worker wrote, “Well if you're truly looking out for the membership safety then keep the mask mandate also demand total vaccination. If not then I feel the UAW is looking at this virus the same as the management.

“The virus will help us get rid of the legacy cost. If the member gets COVID-19 and dies [they] save 35% on pension if that member takes it home and their spouse

dies we save 100% of pension cost. So let's go back to what the great sit downer started,” a reference to the militant strikes in the 1930s which built the UAW as a mass organization.

Another wrote, “I'm ... sick of it. The ones that makes the decisions are doing it from a air conditioned conference room not on a steamy hot plant floor. What a f--king joke our union and management are.”

The socially criminal decision by the ruling elite to keep auto plants and other nonessential industries running throughout the pandemic has led already to the mass spread of infection and death. In auto plants and other industries where social distancing is impossible, masking is inadequate to stop the spread of COVID-19, particularly with the highly transmissible Delta variant.

From the start of the pandemic, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have called for necessary safety measures, including the shutdown of nonessential production, with full compensation for workers paid out of the re-appropriation of the trillions in bailout money handed to Wall Street, until the pandemic is contained. Human life must not be sacrificed any longer on the altar of corporate profits.

To build this program, the SEP and WSWS have assisted autoworkers, teachers, Amazon workers and other sections of the working class in building a network of rank-and-file safety committees at workers across the US and internationally. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and in opposition to the union bureaucracy, demand that workers, with the assistance of independent medical experts, have control over all safety decisions.

To join or for help building a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace, contact us today at wsws.org/workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact