

Outbreaks at factories and workplaces fuel COVID-19 surge in the US

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While barely reported by the US news media, COVID-19 outbreaks in manufacturing, construction sites and other workplaces are a major driving force for the surge of infections and deaths in the United States.

Fueled by the Delta variant, the pandemic is once again spreading out of control in the US. Total cases have surpassed 41 million, with more than 670,000 officially recorded COVID deaths. The seven-day average of hospitalizations jumped to 99,879 on September 12, with an average daily death toll of 1,648, up 27 percent over the last two weeks alone.

While there is no national record-keeping for workplace outbreaks and many states do not report details on outbreak locations, the reports that are available show that manufacturing and construction sites, along with K-12 schools and long-term care facilities, regularly exchange positions as the top three settings for spreading the virus.

On Monday, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services reported that there were 43 ongoing outbreaks at manufacturing and construction sites in the state. This was second only to long-term care facilities (70) and just ahead of schools (42). Twenty of the outbreaks were in the metropolitan Detroit counties, the center of the auto industry.

New outbreaks last week were centered in Michigan schools (67), as students were sent back to classes so parents could be sent back to work, particularly at auto factories, where executives have complained of high absentee rates due to COVID-19 and childcare concerns.

In Illinois, there have been 206 outbreaks at factories and manufacturers since July 1, accounting for 14.2 percent of the total and the highest of any location. In Cook County, which includes Chicago and its industrial suburbs, there have been 56 outbreaks over the last 2 1/2 months, accounting for 32.6 percent of the total.

In California, workplace outbreaks more than doubled between June and July, from 217 to 459. The most

outbreaks since the beginning of the year (69) were in the agricultural sector, where migrant workers who harvest crops are packed into busses and dormitories.

These figures confirm reports the *World Socialist Web Site* has received from workers across the country. In Stuttgart, Arkansas, 55 miles east of Little Rock, workers at a Lennox Industries air conditioner factory report that at least five of their coworkers have died and that the company is bringing in inmates from infected jails to fill in for missing workers. “One of my family members is afraid to open his mouth and he’s about to die,” a worker told the WWS. “People are afraid to speak up because they are worried about being fired. These people should be exposed.”

The WWS reported Monday on the outbreak of infections at Dana auto parts plants in Kentucky, Michigan, Tennessee and other states. In Dry Ridge, Kentucky, multiple workers report that a large proportion of the plant’s workforce of around 800 is currently out due to COVID-19. Ex-Dana worker Steven Fletcher says he was fired from Dana Dry Ridge after missing time due to COVID earlier this year.

There are currently nine active cases at the Dana plant in Warren, Michigan, according to an update from the company dated September 9. The company claims that there were 53 confirmed positive cases at the plant in 2020, but already 114 this year. At least one worker has died from COVID-19 in 2021.

Case data from local government organizations reveals that in every county where a Dana plant is located, COVID-19 cases are on the rise substantially.

Far from providing this information to workers and encouraging quarantining, there is a deliberate conspiracy to conceal this life-saving knowledge from workers.

Last Friday, the California State Senate, where the Democrats hold 31 of the 40 seats, unanimously approved a bill that explicitly keeps millions of workers from

knowing if there are outbreaks at their workplaces. After lobbying from the Chamber of Commerce, state senators removed a clause that allowed the California Public Health Department to reveal the names of individual workplaces with outbreaks, limiting information only to the industry.

Biden has asked the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to draft an emergency rule directing companies of more than 100 employees to adopt COVID-19 vaccination mandates or test their workers regularly. But the agency, which has been gutted for decades, has few means to enforce such a measure even if it were pursued.

Under Biden, OSHA has done no more to protect workers than it did under Trump. Instead, it has ignored thousands of complaints by workers over the lack of safety protocols, employers concealing outbreaks, and threats of being fired if an infected worker does not show up for work.

As of mid-December, OSHA had received 13,000 COVID complaints, not to mention tens of thousands more submitted to state agencies. To date it has concluded 80 percent of the cases, most with cursory investigations that rarely resulted in an inspection. The OSHA web site currently lists only 576 investigations into COVID-19 workplace deaths across the country, with the last one updated October 2020, and has issued only 103 citations related to these COVID deaths.

The unions have played and continue to play the critical role in keeping plants running in the midst of the pandemic. In the spring of last year, the United Auto Workers (UAW) joined with the Big Three companies to reopen the plants after workers took spontaneous action to stop production.

Now, the UAW and other unions are forcing workers to stay on the job even as infections and death spread. UAW officials, who are not planning to return to their Detroit headquarters until 2022 due to COVID concerns, have ignored the demands of Dana workers, who overwhelmingly voted down a pro-company contract, for strike action. Instead, the UAW and the United Steelworkers are forcing Dana workers to labor 12-hour-days, seven days a week—increasing their exposure to COVID—under an extended contract to stockpile parts to aid the company in the event of a strike.

The spread in factories and workplaces takes place as the final major public school district, in New York City, was reopened Monday. The resumption of in-person classes throughout the country is behind a catastrophic

spike in childhood cases. Nearly one million children have been infected since August 5, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The Biden administration, functioning on behalf of the corporate and financial aristocracy, is determined to keep workers on the job and children in schools no matter what the cost in human lives. Under conditions of the buildup of unsustainable levels of debt, fueled by the massive government bailout of Wall Street, they fear that any shutdown of industries would lead to another collapse of the stock markets.

But opposition to this sacrifice of human life for corporate profit is rising around the world, from the revolt of the Dana workers and protesting nurses and students in Alabama, to strikes by Berlin hospital workers and teachers in Europe and Africa. With the assistance of the WSWs, workers at Dana and other auto and auto parts plants, Amazon workers, educators, transit workers all over the world are building rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and in opposition to the unions, which are enforcers of death.

In every workplace, workers must form rank-and-file safety committees to oppose the systematic conspiracy to cover up the spread of COVID-19 and demand full contact tracing information at workplaces and paid quarantine for all workers who are exposed. This must be combined with the demand for the shutdown of nonessential industries and schools, combined with the necessary public health measures, to eradicate the virus once and for all.

This expansion of the national and international network of rank-and-file committees must be combined with a political counteroffensive by the working class to put an end to the profit system once and for all and to reorganize society on the basis of human need, not private profit.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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