

“The union looks at us the same way farmers look at farm animals”

Stellantis workers report widespread COVID-19 infections, breakdown of safety protocols

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5 October 2021

Workers at Stellantis plants have contacted the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the spread of COVID in their plants and the abandonment of already inadequate safety provisions. Despite the spread of the virus, cases are being covered up by management and the United Auto Workers.

Enormous financial pressure is being exerted on workers to report to work despite being sick. Workers who do stay home due to illness face difficulty collecting sick pay and unemployment benefits. Workers report that management is often refusing to pay workers who are self-quarantining or report symptoms.

Supply chain disruptions and the shortage of microchips and other key parts have led to periodic layoffs, adding to the financial uncertainty workers face. At factories producing more profitable vehicles where Stellantis has decided to concentrate production, such as Sterling Heights Assembly near Detroit, workers are being forced to work around-the-clock shifts seven days a week. These conditions are hardly conducive to a clean and safe work environment.

At the Stellantis Tipton, Indiana transmission plant a worker reported that COVID-19 was rampant in the factory, which supplies transmissions for a wide range of Stellantis models. “Things have been really, really messed up in the Tipton plant because of COVID-19. We have an outside janitor service that’s been lying about disinfecting and cleaning. It’s unbelievable how many people have gotten sick and now the people who have been on layoff are going to lose all their vacation time and all their PA days because of COVID-19.

“That’s not the workers’ fault, but the workers are going to get screwed and the international (UAW) reps will not help any of us at all.”

The reopening of schools has led to a surge of COVID cases, deaths and hospitalizations across the US. Indiana is seeing about 2,000 COVID infections a day. While this is down from mid-September, it is still far above the 300 cases per day reported in June and July.

At Stellantis factories, outside of masking, few COVID safety protocols remain, including extra time between shifts for cleaning and social distancing in break areas or workstations.

The worker said, “There are workers in the Tipton plant that are catching COVID-19 and then taking it home and their family members who are catching it. I heard there was a man on another team whose elderly father, who lived with him, died from COVID and now the man is blaming himself for his father’s death because he brought it home.

“From the very beginning of COVID, the international reps and all of the employees at the international level were being allowed to work from home and draw a 40-hour paycheck, and that’s just dirty as hell to me. But it also speaks volumes of what the international reps think of the workers. If that’s not proof, [what is?] They care nothing about the workers on the floor who are being forced to come in. The union looks at us the same way farmers look at farm animals.”

A worker at the Stellantis Jeep complex in Toledo, Ohio said that management was harassing workers who

take time off for legitimate health reasons. The worker, who is suffering the lingering effects of COVID, said that he faced a Catch-22 situation with management.

“I’ve had fever chills, weakness, bad cough, runny nose, muscle joint pain ... management forces us to stay home and won’t pay us, but we have to have money. I am still waiting for SUB (supplemental unemployment benefits) from July when we were forced to shut down.

“We get sickness and accident benefits, but they always fight it. Last time I was off I didn’t get it. If I tested positive for COVID I could get paid. But if I don’t test positive ... either I go to work sick and possibly get disciplined for it or I do the right thing and not come in. They literally have their knee to our neck.

“You go to work you get fired. You don’t go to work; you don’t get paid and lose your house.

“It is almost like slave labor; you are a slave to the company you work for. Losing a week’s pay, a month, who can afford that? That’s \$10,000 a year.”

All the major automakers are facing financial pressure due to supply chain disruptions related to COVID as well as the ongoing shortage of computer microchips. This has forced periodic plant shutdowns and loss off production resulting in less product and lower sales. General Motors, Honda, Nissan as well as Stellantis reported significant declines in sales in the quarter that ended September 30. Stellantis sales were down 19 percent for the quarter. GM sales fell 33 percent. Ford also reported a sharp recent drop.

The auto companies have attempted, with some success, to maintain profit levels by running their most profitable plants at full production levels. Stellantis management has used language agreed to by the UAW in the 2019 national agreement to impose “critical plant” status to enable seven day, 24-hour production at Sterling Heights Assembly, making the highly profitable Dodge Ram light truck.

Stellantis workers at the Detroit Assembly Complex; the Jefferson North plant and the new Mack Avenue plant, have been facing periodic layoffs. A young worker at Mack told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “Workers were sent home at 9 PM Thursday and production was cancelled on Friday and Saturday because of a parts shortage. You must be a full-timer for at least a year to qualify for a short work week of 38.5 hours of pay.

“Those full-timers with less than a year and TPTs

(temporary part time workers) will only be paid for the time they worked, even if it’s 15 hours. If you are a qualified full-timer, if you work at least 1 hour you are guaranteed 38.5 hours pay. The others have to try to get unemployment and it’s a lot less. Most of the workers at the Mack plant—I’d say 60 percent—don’t qualify and only got paid for 31 hours last week.”

Workers at Jefferson North, which builds the Jeep Grand Cherokee, just came back from a two-week shutdown. One week due to a parts shortage and another week due to a chip shortage. A worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “There was talk that when we come back from retooling [next year] we will go under critical status. 10 hours four days is a lot. But who wants to go 7 days, everyday? No way!”

As far as COVID safety measures at Jefferson, the extra 10 minutes for cleaning before shifts was eliminated long ago. “You are supposed to still fill out the questionnaires, but nobody checks it,” the worker added.

Tell us what is happening at your plant. Email the World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org.



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