COVID-19 “spreads like wildfire” through Dana plants as UAW and USW conspire with auto parts maker against workers

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On September 21, the United Steelworkers published an official statement pledging that negotiations on a the nationwide “global” agreement between the USW, the United Auto Workers and parts maker Dana would begin October 7 and “should be resolved by October 10.” Both dates have now passed, and sources tell the *World Socialist Web Site* that meetings have not even taken place on the global agreement. Workers are livid, telling the WSWS that the UAW and USW have told them “absolutely nothing,” as the old sweatshop contract is extended over and over again.

This confirms that the UAW, USW and Dana are not “negotiating” but conspiring against Dana workers to impose the same deal workers’ rejected by 90 percent six weeks ago. As one Michigan Dana worker put it, “They’re stalling to help Dana.”

At the same time, there are new reports of COVID-19 spreading through Dana plants, placing workers’ lives at risk. The decision by Dana, the UAW and USW to force workers to work through outbreaks is a sign not only of the greedy drive for profit, but also of the desperate position the corporation is presently in due to the breakdown of global supply chains.

Each day brings more evidence of the increasingly powerful position Dana workers occupy in the global auto industry if they establish independent, rank-and-file strike committees to win demands for large wage increases, the 40-hour work week, and workers’ control over health and safety, including full pay for COVID shutdowns necessary to save workers’ lives.

COVID-19 “spreading like wildfire” at Dana plants

Workers at Dana plants across the US report spikes in COVID cases at their plants. In Auburn Hills, Michigan, workers report that the COVID-19 situation is so bad that a mask mandate has been reinstated. A number of workers have tested positive at the plant, meaning the facility is likely already a source of community spread.

Dana workers in Toledo, Ohio are also demanding the immediate shutdown of the plant due to the spread of COVID-19 and have threatened a walkout if steps are not taken to address the spread of the virus. Management recently threatened workers with mass firings if there is a walkout over COVID safety. One Toledo worker reports the deadly virus is “spreading like wildfire” and that the facility is understaffed because so many workers are out sick. The worker tells the WSWS that the company is punishing workers for taking unpaid COVID leave by putting others on lines they are not trained for, which is extremely dangerous. The worker said, “Dana needs to be shut down right now.”

COVID-19 is spreading rapidly in many areas where Dana plants are located. In Oakland County, Michigan, where Dana’s plant Auburn Hills is located, cases are the highest since May, with 970 new cases reported October 8, *100 times higher* than in July. Cases in Lucas County, Ohio (where Toledo is located) are 43.5 times higher than in the summer. Cases in Allen County, Ohio, home to Dana’s Lima plant, are the highest at any point in 2021 and 70 times higher than the summer. Allen County, Indiana, where Dana’s Fort Wayne plant is located, reported 274 new cases on October 8, comparable to the worst part of the surge of winter 2020-21.

Case levels across Tennessee and Kentucky continue to remain very high. An average of 37 people die each day of COVID-19 in Kentucky, 49 each day in Tennessee. Cases are high because corporations have kept production running and because school districts are forcing children to return to school, even as more and more evidence emerges that the Delta variant can be deadly for children, with three children dying from COVID-19 every day across the US.

Dana and the unions are far more willing to close a plant because of the lack of parts than because of the spread of illness and death among workers. They consider parts far less replaceable than workers. But the truth is, Dana and the Detroit automakers can’t produce a thing without workers in the US and around the world, and the global supply chain crisis is proving that.

Slowdowns in the plants due to raw material shortages

The breakdown in global supply chains has made Dana increasingly desperate to force workers to risk their lives for corporate profit.

In Fort Wayne, Indiana, workers report that their lines are producing only a tiny fraction of the parts they usually produce due to a decline in raw material. One worker reported their area produced only 22 parts in a full shift, versus 500 to 700 parts under normal conditions. “This is mainly due to not having enough material and poor management,” the worker told the WSWS.

Another Fort Wayne worker reports that some lines are being sent home early because of the lack of parts. Instead, they are producing service parts. But the lack of raw material does not stop the company from mandating workers on weekends. Many workers report being told to stand around for no reason on mandated weekends due to a lack of raw material.

Workers in Dry Ridge, Kentucky report that their plant shut down production at Ford, due to either a lack of raw material or a labor shortage. Workers report being forced to perform the duties of multiple workers due

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to a shortage caused by miserably low wages and the deadly coronavirus situation at the plant.

More model changes weaken Dana's position

Many plants also report ongoing production changes due to the increasingly rapid changeover of the type of parts demanded by companies with which Dana contracts.

In Dry Ridge, workers say there are two new lines of machines currently being installed, a Warthog and a Dead Front line. The Warthog line is part of a new production line for the Ford Bronco while the Dead Front is for Ford's two-wheel drive vehicles.

In Warren, Michigan, workers report a similar changeover, with new machines being installed to produce straight axles for Ford.

In Lima, Ohio, workers report being required to take an order for bus parts that would have otherwise been fulfilled by Dana's plant in Louisville, Kentucky. The need to fill this order has required Dana Lima to stop sending workers to increase production at Dry Ridge.

These continued line changes reflect the changing character of the auto parts industry, which makes the corporations more vulnerable to job actions by workers than ever before. According to an October 2021 report by the industry firm Actify, suppliers are experiencing an increase in model changes and in the complexity of product requests. Because contracts entail "shorter time-to-startup" and involve "shorter programs," this means "mistakes and delays will eat into the profit margin, so there is little room for error." The "time crunches place more strain on automotive suppliers," and "major disruptions" (including those caused by work stoppages) can be incredibly damaging to corporate profits.

Dana workers have never been in a stronger position

While the UAW and USW tell workers they are replaceable and try to delay a strike, the fact of the matter is that workers have never been in a stronger position. Pro-management publications make this abundantly clear.

Forbes magazine wrote recently that auto suppliers' "supply of basic raw materials like steel, aluminum, rubber and thermoplastic resin has become unreliable and the prices are incredibly volatile." Because "the entire industry has adopted just-in-time inventory practices and shrunk its raw material and work-in-process inventories to almost zero," this means "the relentless drive to remove costs and increase speed has left the supply chain too brittle, and we are seeing the cracks everywhere." Forbes warns that employers "have been forced to significantly increase wages to attract and retain workers."

New car supply is decreasing rapidly. By July, Ford had less than a 40-day supply of new cars, down from almost 100 in the middle of 2019.

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote yesterday that "High steel prices have manufacturers scrounging for supplies," adding "car makers like Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Co. are also dealing with rising metal prices."

Timothy Fiore, chairman of the Institute for Supply Management, said that September represented a serious weakening of global supply chains:

> Business Survey Committee panelists reported that their companies and suppliers continue to deal with an unprecedented number of hurdles to meet increasing demand. All segments of the manufacturing economy are impacted by record-long raw materials lead times, continued shortages of critical materials, rising commodities prices and difficulties in transporting products. Global pandemic-related issues—worker absenteeism, short-term shutdowns due to parts shortages, difficulties in filling open positions and overseas supply chain problems—continue to limit manufacturing growth potential. However, optimistic panel sentiment remains strong, with three positive growth comments for every cautious comment. Panelists are fully focused on supply chain issues in order to respond to the ongoing high levels of demand.

The corporations have more than enough money and more than enough future demand to meet workers' needs for large wage increases and a reduction of hours. At the same time, the corporations have never been more reliant on Dana workers to maintain the extraordinary profits they have secured in the midst of the pandemic.

Rank-and-file strike committees needed

The struggle of Dana workers takes place amid a backdrop of a growing strike wave involving nurses, teachers, service workers, miners and other sections of the working class in the US and internationally. On Sunday night, Deere agricultural and construction equipment workers voted down by 90 percent a UAW-backed sellout agreement and are pressing for immediate strike action.

At Dana, there is also a growing mood for a strike. Workers can unlock their tremendous potential power by developing their own rank-and-file strike committees within each plant and across all plants to coordinate planned action, share information, conduct outreach to fellow parts workers, Big Three workers and John Deere workers, and ensure democratic discussion free from the censorship of the pro-corporate UAW and USW.

Workers are in a stronger position than ever, but realizing this power depends on rank-and-file workers taking the conduct of this struggle into their own hands by building strike committees democratically controlled by workers themselves and based on fighting for what workers need, not what the corporate bosses and their servants in the UAW and USW say is affordable.

On Sunday, October 24, the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees are hosting a webinar with scientists and workers to discuss the present state of the pandemic and what must be done to eradicate COVID-19 worldwide. All workers, parents and teachers should register to attend this critical event.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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