

“They are trying to force us to live with the virus”

Autoworkers speak on COVID-19 dangers as case numbers surge across Michigan and US Midwest

WSWS reporting team

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With record case numbers in Michigan and other Midwestern US states, autoworkers have reached out to the *World Socialist Web Site* to express their concerns over the abandonment of even limited COVID-19 safety measures by management. Workers have been denied access to information about cases in the plants under conditions where hospitals in the state are overflowing.

New cases in Michigan, a center of US auto production, have increased 67 percent in the last two weeks and hospitalizations are up 46 percent. The spread of the virus has been fueled by deliberate government policies, including the lifting of all health restrictions and the full reopening of in-person education, which has the support of the unions and the Democratic administration of Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Schools in Detroit, the largest district in the state, are set to reopen today, after student protests over COVID outbreaks and threats of teacher sickouts forced the district to close before the Thanksgiving holiday.

The health danger posed by the full operation of schools and auto plants, both major vectors for the transmission of COVID, are compounded by the emergence of the new Omicron variant, which is potentially more transmissible and deadlier than Delta. In the face of these dangers, the United Auto Workers and the major auto companies have done nothing to protect workers, insisting that it is necessary to “live with the virus.”

A worker at the Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler) Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit spoke about

conditions there. “There were two people on one line today that tested positive and were told not to come in. But this is all word of mouth. Management is saying nothing. One member of the UAW executive board will put out what he knows on cases for the month, but I don’t know how much truth is in it.

“All Stellantis does is give out masks and put out hand sanitizer. They tell you to submit a survey, but the average person is not even doing that because they are not checking it. What’s the point? They’ve already taken away a lot of the precautions they took for COVID. There is no one taking temperatures. There’s not even the illusion that they give a damn about COVID.”

The worker reacted to the launching of the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

“I support the Inquest. I feel that there has been a cover-up from day one. There would be an uproar if people knew the full truth. People already feel like there was a cover-up. You have to be pretty closed-minded to think otherwise; there were too many contradictions along the way. They told people to wear masks. Then they told people who were vaccinated they didn’t have to wear masks, which was a false narrative. You can still have the same issues as someone not vaccinated. You can’t go back and forth with people.”

Asked about the new potentially deadlier Omicron variant, the worker said, “They are trying to force us to live with the virus. It’s not realistic. I can’t see this going on forever, they are trying to force this to

happen.”

A worker at the Saline, Michigan Faurecia auto parts plants said: “At my job they did not even let us know when people had COVID-19. You could not even talk about it. If you knew somebody who caught COVID-19 and you told other workers and the company found out about it, they would pull you to the side and threaten you that you could lose your job if you even talked about it.

“Some of our coworkers were out sick and we didn’t even know they had COVID. The company did not want us to know, and they would threaten us not to talk about it. They told one of my coworkers that she could lose her job because she was causing panic by spreading false rumors. But it was the truth. They just didn’t want us to know it.

“They were sacrificing the health of everyone for the profits of the company.

“The global inquest is so necessary because they should not be allowed to kill off millions of people. What they are doing is criminal. I cannot understand how they can pressure New Zealand and China to not continue to protect their people.

“The COVID-19 pandemic does not just affect America; it affected everybody around the world, so we all have to take responsibility for getting rid of it. I was alarmed just to hear how much power and authority the corporations have over human life. They are only concerned about profit.

“I heard the billionaires just in the United States have increased their wealth by billions, and people are starving. People are struggling. I have to go to work sick because I need my paycheck. I don’t have anything extra because of the times we have been laid off. A lot of people didn’t get paid, not unemployment, nothing.”

John, a worker at the Stellantis Tipton transmission plant outside Kokomo, Indiana, spoke to the WSWS about the situation there. Cases in the state have doubled over the last three weeks and hospitalizations are up 38.8 percent.

“I wish I could actually put it into words how little Chrysler cares about the workers. We have a serious issue right now with outside drivers who haul loads of transmissions to different car plants walking inside the plant without a mask. But we get fired if caught without a mask on and wrote up if we tell outside drivers not to

come in the plant without a mask.

“This (Inquest) is long overdue. These workers are being done so dirty it’s unbelievable.”

A 21-year-old auto parts worker in Michigan said, “I work at a factory where there is no mask mandate; it was lifted months ago by guidance of the state. Very few people still wear a mask, and there is almost no social distancing (which was never practiced in the first place). In addition, there is no mandatory testing for workers.

“When a worker takes their own initiative to get tested for COVID and it comes back positive, the workers are informed by a note on an inconspicuous bulletin board. The note will not identify those infected, and I still do not know if I came into contact with this person at any point. As a consequence, I was denied the knowledge that I was potentially worked near a COVID-positive individual for a week before I found the note. The date listed on the note of the test’s results was just a day before I visited my grandparents. If I had been directly informed, I would not have endangered their lives.

“My work environment is the same as that of many around the nation and the world: wholly inadequate with near-abandonment of COVID-19 measures. In effect, my factory operates under pre-COVID guidelines, very much in line with the herd immunity strategy being employed to maintain profit. I do not feel safe in my factory.

“I believe holding this Global Workers’ Inquest is necessary because with adequate knowledge and drive to end the pandemic, workers would understand the seriousness of preventive measures and refute the carelessness of management to leave workers in the blind as to COVID’s presence in the workplace. In addition, the inquest will open their eyes to the true nature of how societal structure guides the response to COVID, not science or regard for human life.”



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