

Reports point to the rapid spread of cases in US auto plants amid an explosion of Omicron

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As COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations surge across the midwestern US states, autoworkers report that no additional mitigation measures are being put in place at auto factories while the few measures still in place are increasingly flouted. The danger of mass infection and death is being increased manyfold by the spread of the Omicron variant, which can evade protection by vaccines and immune antibodies from previous disease.

This danger is being compounded by the refusal of federal, state and local officials to implement even the most minimal public measures and insisting that schools and nonessential business remain in full operation despite the clear and present danger. While reports of new COVID-19 cases in auto plants are for the most part not made public, all indications are that cases are rising.

Since the start of the pandemic, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and management at the Detroit automakers have colluded to hide as much information as possible about COVID-19 infections and deaths in auto plants, including the number and location. However, the information that is available from various plants across the US point to increased dangers.

Crowded and poorly ventilated auto factories are a known vector of COVID-19 transmission and community spread of the virus. According to information released by UAW Local 2000 at Ford Ohio Assembly outside of Cleveland there were 37 active cases as of Monday, a record at the plant. Ford, meanwhile, recently announced it was delaying until March plans to return 30,000 office staff to onsite work due to the spread of COVID-19.

Cases at the Stellantis (Chrysler) Sterling Stamping Plant north of Detroit are also at a record level, reaching a high of 42 confirmed cases in November. At least two Sterling Stamping workers have died of

COVID-19 this year. The latest was 47-year-old Blair Alexander Braden, father of two small children, who died in October.

A Sterling Stamping worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* *Autoworker Newsletter*, “The increasing COVID is criminal. The concerned employee that wants a safe workplace is squelched. If you complain about PPE compliance, your boss points the finger at you, empowering the political divide against PPE safety precautions to take action against you. I have been called a bitch, MF, all because the supervisors will not take action. Their only concern is about appeasement of the upper echelon and profit/parts numbers.”

A worker at the Ford Kansas City Assembly in Claycomo, Missouri, said, “They’re tight-lipped about who is out with COVID, and there are a lot of people at the plant who are out sick. The plant is running even though they’re short on chips and people are getting sick. The Ford F-150s are all lined up and parked in the lot, not even being shipped out to dealers.

“A lot of people are getting sick with COVID and some people are getting fired for being out sick for too long. The governor [Michael Parson, Republican] cut the extended pandemic unemployment benefits, so people are losing their jobs and they can hardly afford anything.”

The increase in cases in the auto plants takes place as hospitalizations are surging in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Michigan reported 11,722 new cases of COVID-19 and 330 virus-related deaths December 16, an average of 5,861 cases over the two-day reporting period. Hospitalizations in the state are at the highest level during the pandemic.

Bob Riney, an official with Henry Ford Health System, told local media, “The unfortunate reality right

now is no matter which hospital you're talking to, no matter what health system you're talking to, the word that you're going to hear about current conditions in the state of Michigan is 'crisis.'" He emphasized, "We are in a crisis. There's no way around it. There's no way to sugarcoat it."

Amidst the surge, the state of Michigan has cut back reporting on workplace-related COVID-19 outbreaks. The weekly reports no longer contain data for outbreaks at manufacturing and construction sites, retail, bars and restaurants, social gatherings, events, offices, personal services and religious services. In announcing the change, state officials cited strained department resources as well as "challenges related to case investigations," likely a cryptic reference to stonewalling by employers and unions.

A worker at Ohio Assembly said workers who are exposed to COVID-19 and forced to quarantine are not being paid by Ford and must apply for state unemployment benefits. Workers who are exposed to coworkers with the virus are told that if they were masked at the time, there is no need to self-quarantine.

An Ohio Assembly worker in their mid 50s reportedly died a little over two months ago. Workers at many plants report that even minimal safety protocols have been abandoned by management with the support of the UAW. This includes temperature screenings, strict enforcement of masking requirements and measures to promote social distancing.

The Sterling Stamping worker said, "The UAW and company safety men are rarely seen. There are only warnings given for non-compliance. I have been told the UAW cannot discipline non-conforming employees! [Those who refuse to wear masks and other PPE]. Isn't the job of the UAW to protect and demand safety protocols be implemented in the workplace? Isn't it the company's responsibility to abide by federal safety precautions to keep their doors open? Safety glasses, hearing protection, shoes..."

A supporter of the Faurecia Saline Rank-and-File Safety Committee told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "The policy went from hushing up infections and hurrying infected workers out of the plant to actively threatening anyone who tried to warn coworkers about infections. Anyone who was discussing the COVID infections in the plant was pulled aside by a supervisor and threatened with being fired. The union stood by

and did nothing."

A worker at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant said he was personally aware of five COVID-19 cases in the last two weeks, with disease being allowed to spread unabated through the plant while filthy conditions persist.

"The cafeteria is dirty and there are rats as big as cats at Chicago. People are coming to work with COVID and making other people sick. People are going home sick all the time. Who knows how many people are in the same area as people who are getting sick? They don't tell us anything. No one in the union will do anything. Some people don't wear masks if they don't want to, and the masks they give us break. So yes, I believe it's dangerous in there!"

With the Omicron variant poised to generate a wave of new infections beyond anything yet seen in the pandemic, workers cannot afford to wait to act. These conditions underscore the need for the building and expansion of the network of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-corporate unions and big business politicians, in auto plants, schools and other workplaces. Workers must have the right to enforce a safe and healthy workplace, including the right to halt production if conditions are dangerous. These rank-and-file committees must fight to unite all sections of workers and young people around a policy of global elimination of the coronavirus in opposition to the program of the ruling class of profits before human life.

For more information on building rank-and-file committees in your plants contact us today.



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