

COVID rapidly spreading through Detroit auto plants with reports of at least three deaths

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COVID infections are spreading throughout Detroit area auto plants, with coworkers reporting at least three deaths in recent days. The state of Michigan, the center of the US auto industry, is seeing a seven-day average of 5,481 cases a day and 100 daily deaths, spurred on by the new Omicron variant.

The dire situation in the factories is not being reported in the corporate media and is being deliberately concealed by the auto companies and the United Auto Workers union, which are collaborating to keep production going, no matter what the human cost. However, workers are exchanging information about outbreaks and deaths on social media and in discussions with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*.

Over the past few days, two notices were posted on UAW Local 1264 Facebook page about deaths at the Sterling Stamping Plant (SSP), a Stellantis (Chrysler) factory located just north of Detroit.

On Saturday, a notice was posted on the death of Omie Smith, a first shift worker who, according to the post, was “not just a coworker but a friend to many” who worked at Sterling Stamping.

On Monday, a funeral notice was posted on the union Facebook page for Kevin Andrew Railey, 51, reporting that he died on December 18. The notice was followed by several comments sending condolences to his family and warmly remembering Bailey. “I always enjoyed working with him,” read one, while another said, “I’ll miss our talks.” After the comment, “This one hurts,” a worker replied, “The last few have... you figure we spent years with these guys...”

“I was told Omie died from COVID,” a Sterling Stamping worker told the WSW. “He used to be in a group that played chess on the first shift. They cover it up when someone dies of COVID. The new death [Railey] is also COVID-related. I blame the company. They have been negligent.”

The worker reported that the nearby Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant currently has 300 workers off work because of COVID infections and quarantining. “The union is even watering this down,” he said, reporting that some UAW officials were slandering workers by claiming they were faking COVID to protect themselves from strict attendance policies.

“That’s telling me that Omicron is already here and that it’s not a ‘normal’ spread. Over the last couple of days, I’ve seen management telling people to mask up. I’ve never seen that before. The UAW safety man,” he added, “is piece of crap always siding with management.”

At least five SSP workers have died of COVID since the pandemic began, but this is likely an underestimation.

At the Warren Truck Assembly plant, a few miles south of SSP, infections are spreading out of control. A recent post on the UAW Local 140 Facebook page reported the death of worker whose name has not been revealed. “It’s a shame that COVID has killed a person recently and it’s going through the plant like wildfire. But it’s still running like nothing is going on. Damn near the whole chassis (line) got COVID just in case y’all didn’t know.”

Another worker posted a comment about the pressure the company is putting on Temporary Part-Time workers (TPTs), noting that some are afraid to report that they were in contact with an infected worker because of worries they won’t be paid or could lose their jobs.

“Multiple people in the plant are testing positive,” a veteran Warren Truck worker who was infected in early 2020 told the WSW. “They need to shut it down. I read on the Facebook site that people are getting COVID like crazy even though they’re vaccinated. Someone needs to stand up and shut them down.

“People want to know what to do, because even their kids have COVID and they’re not even letting them take off work for their children, and they’re firing people. You never hear anymore what’s going on from the union or management. They’re supposed to shut down for two weeks for the holidays. We’ll see what happens afterwards, because the surge from the holidays and people gathering is going to make it even higher.

“I can’t believe neither the union nor the governor has not shut these plants down again,” she concluded.

On Tuesday, Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer explicitly rejected closing schools and non-essential businesses during her first press conference on COVID since June. Echoing President Biden, she falsely claimed expanding

vaccinations and boosters were the only way to stop the spread of Omicron and relieve already overwhelmed hospitals. One of the state's major goals, she said, was to "keep children in school and allow businesses to stay open."

On Monday, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services reported there were 119 new outbreaks in the state last week, including 56 at K-12 schools and 34 at long-term care facilities. In early December, the state agency stopped reporting outbreaks at manufacturing, construction and other worksites, although they were just as high or higher than at schools and nursing homes.

The department reduced its reporting requirements after meeting resistance from employers. "It requires a lot of case investigation details that people sometimes don't feel comfortable sharing and so even when health departments were reporting that information, it was perhaps underestimating the type of transmission happening in those settings," Dr. Natasha Bagdasarian, the state's chief medical executive, said. "Rather than relying on data that was not giving us a good sense of what was going on, it was better for a variety of reasons to decrease those reporting requirements."

In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the state government is a wholly owned subsidiary of General Motors, Ford, Stellantis, Dow Chemical, Pfizer, Kellogg's and other corporate giants based or operating in Michigan.

While public health services have been cut to the bone, understaffed hospitals are triaging dying patients and children, and teachers are packed into infected and poorly ventilated schools, Governor Whitmer signed a package of bills to provide more than \$1.5 billion in grants and tax incentives to big business the day before her COVID press conference. The corporate handout, taken after Ford opted to build electric batteries in Tennessee, was funded with federal COVID relief money.

In March 2020, as COVID was spreading inside plants, rank-and-file autoworkers at Sterling Heights (SHAP), Warren Truck, Jefferson North (JNAP) and other plants halted production with wildcat job actions in defiance of the UAW. The concerted action by the working class, which was part of a wave of struggles across the world, forced the two-month shutdown of industries and schools and saved hundreds of thousands of lives. The corporate and political establishment responded by promoting right-wing and fascistic elements to "liberate" Michigan and other states, and by collaborating with the UAW and other unions to reopen schools and factories based on the lying claim that this could be done "safely."

What few safety protocols were introduced—like temperature checks, filling out health status information on cellphone apps and staggered shifts to prevent large numbers of worker amassing at entrance and exit gates—have long been abandoned. An infected worker at the Jefferson plant posted that her production team was blamed for getting too close to her when the line was temporarily down. "But what about the fact that I

have to walk past all of them to get to the refrigerator, microwave, desk, lockers and lunch table?" she asked UAW Local 7 officials. "How do y'all allow Chrysler to blame them and not send them out to be tested?"

A young Warren Truck worker called for workers to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW, to fight for the shutdown of the factories and schools and full compensation for workers. He recalled how workers took matters into their own hands in early 2020 and said they had to do the same today.

"People started to get anxious, especially those already concerned about health issues caused by working together in close proximity to each other. Then cases and deaths started to arise in the plants," he said.

"But the company and the UAW acted like it was business as usual. Nothing was being told to the workers. It was like it was just a typical day. But then information spread through word of mouth, on Facebook pages, about workers getting sick and dying. Social media is where hundreds, if not thousands, of workers group together and discuss topics good, bad and ugly. Word got out on Facebook pages for SHAP, Warren Truck, JNAP and others.

"The walkouts started. People were disgusted by the efforts of the company and the union to isolate certain work areas where workers were infected to try to keep it quiet. In the paint shop at Warren Truck, at least four workers died. Bodies were piling up at Sinai Hospital."

The worker said he supported the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, which was gathering evidence about the dangers workers confront in workplaces and the economic and political motives behind the decision to allow SARS-CoV-2 to spread and develop into worldwide pandemic, which has claimed the lives of millions.

"I want to know what percentage of the economy rests on workers in these plants? What is the value of these trucks—and why weren't these factories repurposed to keep the population safe? Why have children been sent back to school? Why haven't workers been given time off to accommodate virtual learning for children? Why didn't essential workers from day one get the protections they needed? Will there be compensation for them and for those who have lost loved ones or who are suffering from long COVID? That's what I want to know."

To break the conspiracy of silence, we urge workers to contact the WSWS with information about the spread of Covid in your plant. We will take all precautions to protect the identity of workers.



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wsws.org/contact