

“The plants should absolutely be closed. We should stand up and not go in.”

## US autoworkers sound alarm as Omicron rips through factories

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*The Autoworker Newsletter encourages workers to contact us and share information about the conditions at your plant. Email us at [autoworkers@wsws.org](mailto:autoworkers@wsws.org).*

With cases of the highly transmissible Omicron variant spreading rapidly in schools, workplaces and communities, US autoworkers are reaching out to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* to express their anger over the absence of serious public health measures to protect the population.

While the number of new infections and deaths is being kept tightly under wraps by both the United Auto Workers union and management for the Detroit-based car manufacturers, the available information points to a highly dangerous situation in the auto plants. It is reflective of an uncontrolled surge of COVID-19 in the US and Europe, where governments have increasingly abandoned efforts to slow the virus apart from vaccines, despite Omicron's ability to cause breakthrough infections.

At the Stellantis Sterling Stamping Plant in the Detroit area, the UAW reported 45 cases for December, a new record. Given the delay in reporting there may be additional December cases added to that total over the course of the next week. At least five workers have died at the plant due to COVID-19 during the pandemic.

The virus is spreading rapidly throughout Michigan more broadly, with a record two-day average of 13,673 new cases. There is now a weekly average of 93 deaths per day.

A message sent by the UAW at Sterling Stamping encapsulates the criminal indifference of the union, and indeed the entire corporate and political establishment, to the escalating health catastrophe. They write, “The Leadership would like to welcome everyone back and we

hope that you had a safe & blessed holiday! Due to the uptick in reported Covid-19 cases (Statewide) the Union is asking that everyone be safe.”

Workers at several Detroit-area Stellantis plants report that management is forcing temporary part-time workers (TPTs) to work up to 12-hour shifts to fill in for manpower shortages. Management has sent around a letter restating a policy adopted in May of last year that vaccinated individuals do not need to quarantine if exposed to COVID-19, a sign that infections are widely spreading. Meanwhile, workers also report that masking is not being enforced in the general assembly area, one of the most cramped areas of the plant.

Several autoworkers expressed agreement with the demands raised by the WSWs and the *Autoworker Newsletter* for a shutdown of nonessential production, with full compensation for laid off workers, until the virus is contained and a policy of elimination of COVID-19 is put in place.

A worker at the Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant north of Detroit said, “Workers want to shut down again. It is getting very dangerous, and people can see their lives are at stake. There are a lot of workers off sick, and the company just mandated TPTs to work 10-12 hours a day. The schools have gone virtual in Detroit and people can see that the virus is out of control. How many more people are going to get sick? How many more are going to be in their deathbeds?”

“The idea of quarantining to save lives is hundreds of years old. It happened before we had modern technology and infrastructure, when people were still living in villages. Now, it's like our lives simply don't matter. More and more people, especially the younger people are seeing this. Apparently, some workers took part in a

walkout against mandating overtime. Everyone can see.

“People have thought a certain way for a long time, that the system will be here forever, but we’re being forced to change our thinking. We’re coming close to that.”

A younger worker at Warren Truck said, “Working the TPTs 12 hours is ridiculous. They are trying to burn them out before they ever get to be full-time. The plants should absolutely be closed. We should stand up and not go in. People are being forced to work when they are positive. One worker said, ‘I have COVID but I can’t afford to stay home’—and they let him work.”

The worker applauded the stand taken by teachers in the Chicago Public Schools, who voted overwhelmingly to suspend in-person teaching due to the pandemic. “What the Chicago teachers are doing is good. They are protecting the kids. I’m with them. I have kids, and I don’t want to bring COVID-19 home to them. We should be out with the teachers too. The more people that get together the better.”

A memo distributed by the UAW local at the Mack Truck Plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, dated December 23 reported that 24 workers had tested positive in the prior three days, with 49 active cases at the plant. Given the widespread transmission reported over the Christmas holidays that figure is now likely much higher.

COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania are skyrocketing, with a weekly average of 20,497 cases for the week ending January 4, a pandemic record for the state. Lehigh County had a weekly average of 802 cases, also a pandemic record. As of Monday, there were 5,629 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 in the state.

A worker at the Macungie plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “I’ve been talking to people in my work area, and what people have been saying is not good at all. Everyone has sick family members, neighbors, etc. ... I believe this is going to be getting a lot worse. There is some talk about what Mack and Volvo and the UAW are going to do about the testing process and what’s going to take place, but no one seems to have any concrete information yet. It’s all up in the air.”

Amidst the spread of sickness and death, the automakers have celebrated booming profits, taking advantage of tight supplies to jack up prices and raise profit margins. The executive editor of *Automotive News* recently wrote summing up 2021, “As frustrating as COVID-19’s persistence has been, the auto industry has learned to manage quite well, for the most part. Automakers are raking in profits by prioritizing high-margin vehicles and slashing incentives. Dealers are

selling at full price or above with near-zero inventory expense. Another year of scarcity should keep profits high, at least for those two groups.”

Ford led the Detroit automakers in 2021, seeing a 140 percent increase in its stock price in 2021. Ford’s stock price rise even beat electric vehicle maker Tesla. In the final three months of the year, Ford sold more vehicles than Stellantis, General Motors or Toyota, the latter of which surpassed GM as the largest US automaker by sales volume for 2021. “We could sell more vehicles if we had them, no question,” a sales analyst for Ford told the *Detroit Free Press*. “We sell whatever we can produce.”

All of this has taken place on the backs of autoworkers. A worker on the day shift at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that cases at the plant were beginning to spiral out of control. “More people at Ford are getting COVID-19. A few are bosses that wouldn’t get the vaccine, and one of them is very sick,” he said. “My wife and myself are lucky we haven’t been sick. But we try to stay away from people and stay to ourselves. Everything is getting worse, out of control. But it seems big companies like Ford are making a lot of money, while cost of living is crazy, like food and gas.”

Facebook posts by workers at Chicago Assembly Plant described hellish conditions, with workers forced to come in even if family members were sick with COVID-19, and the UAW and management allowing symptomatic or infected workers into the plant. There are also reports that management is not accepting the results of at-home COVID-19 tests.

Similar conditions are being reported at other plants. Facebook posts at the Dana Fort Wayne, Indiana, auto parts plant complain of lack of enforcement of masking protocols and laxity in allowing previously infected workers back into the plant without testing.

To bring about the policies needed to halt and suppress the pandemic and prevent a further colossal loss of human life, collective action by workers is needed. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to form rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the pro-corporate UAW, to organize this fight.



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