Auto factories are not safe! Stop production to halt spread of Omicron!

Autoworkers Rank-and-File Safety Committee
10 January 2022

The following statement was drafted and approved following a Sunday meeting of autoworkers around the country. To join the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, fill out the form below or write to autoworkers@wsws.org.

The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on our brothers and sisters to help fight for the shutdown of the auto industry and other nonessential businesses to bring the spread of the coronavirus pandemic under control. Full compensation must be guaranteed for affected workers through a tax on Wall Street's multi-trillion dollar pandemic profits.

The situation is critical. On Friday the state of Michigan reported 40,692 new cases of COVID-19 and 259 deaths over a two-day period, a record number. The situation is similar in many states across the US.

Hospitals are reaching capacity as case numbers explode. The already dire shortage of health care workers is being made worse by the sickness of staff. More than 400 hundred workers in the Beaumont health care system in Detroit are out of work because of infection, stretching the health care system even further past its limit.

Large manufacturing facilities, along with schools, are major vectors for the transmission of the disease. To keep us working under these conditions is beyond irresponsible; it is a crime. The plants, where thousands of people congregate along the assembly line in poorly-ventilated buildings, are not just a danger to the health and lives of autoworkers, but to our family members, our friends and neighbors, the entire country and even the world.

Case numbers at most auto plants are being covered up by management and the United Auto Workers, the so-called "union." But there are many reports of spreading infections and deaths. Workers tell us that 500 are currently out sick at the Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly plant and 300 were out last month at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP). In December alone, three workers died of COVID at the Sterling Stamping Plant, and at SHAP, a worker and her husband both died last month from COVID.

We are being treated worse than animals. The phony health measures put in place to get us back into the factories have been all but eliminated. There is no enforcement of masking, and basic plant sanitation and cleaning are not being carried out. In many cases, vaccinated workers are being told to report to work even after testing positive for COVID if they say they have no symptoms.

The UAW refuses to tell us when our coworkers are infected, and there is no contract tracing and quarantine. Those exposed to the virus are told to keep working. Vaccinated workers are being told to report to work who have tested positive for COVID if they say they have no symptoms. Workers forced onto sick leave can't get paid, causing some to lie and come in sick and infect others.

To claim the companies can't afford to shut down is a lie. The auto companies are continuing to make record profits while we get sick and die. *Automotive News* just boasted that car companies "are raking in profits" by taking advantage of shortages and jacking up prices. We are building cars and trucks that are nonessential in the midst of a deadly pandemic, just so they can make big profits.

The government doesn't care about our lives. The new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines reducing the quarantine time from 10 days to five days is a joke. It is not based on science, but the needs of employers for workers to keep profits rolling. Now the director of the CDC, Rochelle Walensky says

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it is “really encouraging news” that most of those dying from COVID have pre-existing condition. In other words, the government does not care about mass death if those who are dying are sick or elderly and not working. Better if they die off to save money on healthcare and social security.

Throughout the pandemic and under both administrations, the government and corporate media have lied their heads off, claiming that the virus is “mild,” or that the pandemic is almost over, or that children can't get infected in schools. When the virus, which cannot be fooled by propaganda, exposes one lie, they immediately move on to the next one.

Only two months ago the press was awash with claims that the end of the pandemic was “just around the corner.” Then the Omicron variant was discovered in South Africa. Now, we are being told by politically-connected quack scientists like Ezekiel Emanuel, who has emerged as Biden’s de-facto mouthpiece on television news, that COVID will become endemic—that is, the pandemic will never end—and that everyone will have to learn to live with it. Emanuel is known as “Doctor Death” for his campaigning for years for policies aimed explicitly at reducing life expectancy.

Scientists have known for centuries, in fact since Medieval times, that shutdowns and quarantines are an essential to contain pandemics. The closure of all nonessential workplaces and the transition to remote learning for all schools, lasting only a few months, could stop the circulation of the virus lay the basis for the full-scale elimination of COVID-19. This would have to be combined with financial support to workers and small businesses that are impacted.

The rich say that COVID is permanent because they have no interest in ending it. This means it is up to the working class, the great majority of society which produces the world’s wealth, to take action. We autoworkers must unite with the growing strike movement of teachers, as well as with health care workers and others who are facing intolerable conditions, to demand a shutdown of nonessential production until measures are put in place to bring the pandemic to an end. What has been done in China and other countries with a zero COVID policy shows that the virus can be eliminated and millions of lives saved.

We know many of our coworkers are already extremely angry that their lives are being sacrificed. But that is not enough. We need to act now to build the scaffolding for a movement to save lives. This must be done outside and in rebellion against the pro-corporate trade unions, which have not only spent decades enforcing sellouts, but are now colluding with management to kill us in the factories.

This is a global fight. Even if the virus is contained in the US or another country, experience has shown that if the virus continues to spread in the developing world, this creates ideal conditions for the emergence of new variants, jeopardizing not only lives in Africa or Asia but in the so-called “developed” countries. This means we must link up with our brothers and sisters in the auto plants around the world, beginning with Canada and Mexico.

We demand the immediate closure of all schools, non-essential plants and other workplaces, with full income for workers affected. No worker should be expected to place his or her life in danger. Plants should not re-open until workers in consultation with health scientists say it is safe. Workers must have control over health and safety conditions.

- Regular, free testing for all workers.
- The provision of free, high-quality N95 masks for all workers.
- A program of rigorous contact tracing and quarantining for at least 14 days of symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals.
- The guiding principle must be the defense of human lives takes unconditional priority over profits.

We call on workers to distribute this statement widely. Contact the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee for help building a rank-and-file committee at your workplace:

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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