

“This is exactly what all the factory workers should do”: Autoworkers support struggle by teachers and students to shut down schools

Our reporters
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Autoworkers across the United States are supporting the growing movement by teachers and students to shut down in-person schooling to contain the spread of the Omicron variant. Chicago schoolteachers are battling a sellout by the Chicago Teachers union to reopen schools, while students, parents and teachers across the country are organizing walkouts and sickouts to force buildings to shut down. A city-wide walkout by students in New York City on Tuesday affected dozens of schools. This is part of an international struggle, including a nationwide strike by French teachers today.

“I support the student walkouts [in New York City], it’s the safe thing to do,” one Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) worker said. “The newly elected mayor [Eric Adams] should be ashamed of himself but his arrogant attitude will only make things worse. So, the students have done that, the safest thing possible for their own health and their fellow students’ health and safety. If the mayor has a problem with what they did, then he should enroll his children in that school.”

A worker at General Motors Wentzville Assembly Plant near St. Louis said, “To keep the children and staff safe, I think online school should be enforced till the numbers go down.” Shutdowns, vaccine and mask mandates, widespread testing and contact tracing are needed, she added. “That’s the only way we are going to get past this.”

A worker at Ford’s Chicago Assembly plant said, “I know that teachers are needed, but they also have the right to be safe doing it and the children have the same rights to be safe. It’s very sad that parents have to choose to work or not work. We have a coworker here at Ford Chicago that had to take a leave because she has no one to care for or watch her child when they are not in school.

“They say over a million workers quit their jobs because of their children. I know if I had a child in school, I don’t think that I would send them. I would home school them if I could. “And these union [leaders] are up to no good. Right now, UAW Local 551 at the Chicago plant is trying to change the local bylaws so they can screw us over.

“I think walking out or a wildcat would be a good idea [with teachers and autoworkers united]. I thank the teachers for all their hard work and taking care of the children at their own risk. We, the whole world, need good teachers. Teachers are the future of our community and our lives.”

Another Stellantis worker from Indiana, after watching a of the walkouts in New York, said simply, “This is exactly what all the factory workers should do.”

After two full years of the pandemic, the situation in the United States is dire. More than 814,000 new cases were recorded yesterday and over 2,200 people died, while hospital systems are spread past the breaking point. Alongside schools and nursing homes, factories and construction sites are the primary centers of transmission for the virus, according to outbreak figures recorded by the state of Michigan. The state abruptly stopped tracking outbreaks in factories in late November, citing the difficulty in obtaining data from worksites—an indication of the cover-up of infections by the auto companies, with the assistance of the pro-corporate United Auto Workers.

The situation in the plants is rapidly deteriorating. At least 500 workers are currently out sick at Stellantis’ Warren Truck plant in the Detroit area, while at SHAP, over 1,000 are currently out. The death toll continues to mount. Yesterday, UAW Local 1700 announced the death of SHAP worker Thomas Whitney. The cause of death was not announced, but COVID-19 is widely suspected.

In response, management is “flooding the plants with temporary part-time (TPT) workers to try to replace them,” in the words of one SHAP worker. At Warren Truck, anger is at the boiling point over the decision to work TPTs, who are the lowest-paid and most exploited section of the workforce, for 12-hour shifts and six days per week to maintain production. A letter from a TPT to the *World Socialist Web Site* went viral among autoworkers last week, many of whom wrote in to the WSWWS with their own experiences.

A skilled worker at Chrysler Technical Center in Auburn Hills, Michigan, explained the dangers white collar workers at the facility face. “The housekeeping may be better and the restrooms cleaner than in the factories, but the new company [Stellantis] that took over doesn’t give a crap about the health and safety of workers at CTC either. As for the UAW, we call the health and safety reps, and they don’t respond. We talk about this every day. There is a joint labor-management health and safety committee, and they work together.

“Most of the workers at the tech center are masked and 100 percent of the non-union workers are vaccinated because of the company mandate. The UAW is opposed to a mandate because they want workers to show up to work.”

Referring to those lost to COVID-19, he added, “The UAW health rep at CTC passed away the day before Christmas from COVID.”

The worker continued, “When the building is fully staffed, there are 11,000 people who work here. Some 8,000–9,000 are working remotely now. There are 2,000 in the building on any given day. All the UAW-represented workers, except the designers, are in the building. That includes those workers involved in electronics and building and making things that cannot be done remotely.

“We got paid sick leave before the pandemic, but we aren’t getting it for COVID. There is a lack of social distancing. They are supposed to do tracing and inform us when someone is infected. But they keep things secret by falsely pointing to the HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) rules designed to protect the privacy of patients. I know the law, and this does not prevent the company and the union from revealing COVID infections to protect public health.

“I’m 62 years old and have preexisting conditions. I show up for work like the workers in the factories. For the corporations, they look at me about to retire, and they say my life doesn’t matter anymore. My wife is a retired schoolteacher, and the schools are just like the factories, few masks, no social distancing and COVID everywhere.

“I voted for Biden, but not for this. Trump gets vaccinated and riles up his supporters about ‘don’t take away my rights’ with vaccines and masks. I say, ‘Don’t take away my right to live.’ But it’s both parties. They don’t care, they want all of us to get sick.”

Other autoworkers voiced support for the teachers.

“Given the gravity of the situation, I don’t think it’s a bad thing to go remote,” a veteran Ford Chicago Assembly worker told the WSWs. “Look, at this point, the teachers have to look out for themselves. Nobody else is going to do it for them. The union isn’t going to do it for them. The government or city obviously isn’t going to do it for them. They’re going to have to hunker down and pull it off on their own. Nobody else is going to care about their health or how it affects them.”

The policies of both big business parties have been virtually identical in relation to the pandemic, he said. “The Democrats are about the same as the Republicans. They say, ‘Let’s take it easy here, keep going to work, we’ll be all right.’”

COVID-19 is spreading widely at the Ford plant, he said. “It’s crazy. We’re having outbreaks of COVID, a lot of outbreaks. There’s a lot of people out with it. It’s like a little chain reaction. They keep moving people from one place to another, back and forth.

“There’s quite a bit of exposure here,” he continued. “If anything, you’re more exposed here than anywhere else.”

Management and the UAW, however, “are not saying anything. They’re just saying there’s an uptick. They don’t have the sense of urgency like when things first started. Before they had the clean-up crew going around, cleaning up all the tables where you eat.

“The whole facemask policy and social distancing, it’s very lax now. If they see someone without a mask, they might say something, they might not. And we’re all going in and out at the same time, so there’s no social distancing. I think they’re just

doing the bare minimum to comply with state law and not be liable, but other than that they really don’t care.”

When he tested positive for the COVID-19, he said management asked him if he had stayed six feet apart from the other workers. “I said, ‘What do you mean? I’m working, which means you have to be a foot from someone or six feet from someone, or whatever. Unless you change your job, it’s just not possible to maintain that distance.’

“Let’s cut the BS. We have to work side-by-side all night. And it’s not well-ventilated, they know this. I don’t know what they’re expecting from the workers. The workers are doing what they can. Face masks? Okay, what else? Six feet apart, well, that’s impossible.”

Addressing himself to educators directly, he said, “All those sweet words about ‘How we care about our educators.’ Don’t listen to the words, look at the actions. And the actions show they don’t care. As workers, we have to look out for our best interests. That’s it. That’s the bottom line.”

A Mack Trucks manufacturing worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania, said, “I want teachers to know I support your fight to save the lives of students and your own. The CTU is betraying you, diverting your struggle and misdirecting your momentum, in an effort to demoralize you the same way all the other trade unions do, including the UAW, which ‘represents’ me. We had a worker die from COVID and the UAW has yet to acknowledge his death.

“I cannot imagine the trauma it would be for a classroom of students to lose a teacher to this virus in an entirely preventable death. Hold your ground. Fighting back against what will surely mean mass infections and deaths as a result of keeping schools open is the most important thing for everyone in the working class to fight for right now. You are leading that fight.

“I’m doing everything I can to spread word and build support for you where I am. It used to be common sense to protect children at all costs. Now it’s the governments’ and teacher unions’ policy to infect children at all costs. You have the power to stop this and we as a class can bring an end to this virus if we make the conscious effort to do so.

“For all the students walking out, thank you for supporting your teachers and community by taking the actions necessary to protect yourselves and all of us. To anyone who doesn’t see it, you are saving lives. It means everything to see such a strong future for the world embodied in your actions.”



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