

# Autoworkers describe horrible working conditions: “There are so many out because of COVID; we are operating with a serious skeleton crew”

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18 January 2022

*To tell us about conditions at your plant, email [autoworkers@wsws.org](mailto:autoworkers@wsws.org). All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

As the wave of COVID-19 infections sends tens of thousands into overcrowded hospitals and ICUs, US autoworkers are speaking out against the refusal of the auto companies and the United Auto Workers to implement any mitigation measures.

Although hospitalizations and deaths in Michigan, the center of the auto industry, are already at record levels for the pandemic, the state’s top medical officer, Dr. Natasha Bagdasarian said in a recent interview with a local television channel that “based on Michigan’s data, what they’re really predicting is that we will peak by the end of January, maybe early February. So, we have not seen the worst, I fear.”

The continuing danger posed by the virus was shown last week by the death of 32-year-old Chicago Ford worker Caleb Mateo Dye after a long fight against COVID-19. In a display of indifference, neither Ford management nor the UAW informed co-workers of Caleb’s death. In fact, it has been the policy of both union and management in auto plants to conceal worker deaths and infections.

A worker at the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, described the situation at his plant to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. “Six hundred seventy-two of the 2,098 of us working have caught COVID that Mack admits to. Several workers have died in the past few months with no cause given. I know for a fact one of (the deaths) was COVID, the company and UAW know it too, but they hide it to keep us working peacefully.

“I talk with a number of workers throughout my shift, and more and more are starting to understand that we are our only defense. The UAW canceled union meetings due to COVID after these guys died. If that doesn’t tell you you’re on your own, I don’t know what will. Many are still hesitant to act, but seeing workers die around us is wearing that hesitancy thin. There are only so many coworkers you can see die before you start to question things, before you’re willing to fight back.”

Another Mack Trucks worker added, “The company only allows us 11 minutes for a break, even during COVID. It isn’t being extended to give us time to wash our hands before eating our food; there is no hand sanitizer in the work area.”

A temporary worker at the Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant north of Detroit also spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. “If you get sick, you have to prove that it happened inside of the plant to be paid. People have tried to do this, but the process has been drawn out, for full- and part-time workers. Nobody is getting paid.”

He said that the experience two years into the pandemic was having an impact on the consciousness of workers. “The new people and low seniority people, they are definitely the most vocal because everything is affecting us the most. Full-time workers, the first-tier ones, they probably absolutely feel this way also, but they are also only a few years from retirement. The people that have been there 25 years, they say that I’ve never seen anything like this.”

He said the corporate media did not provide an accurate account of what has happened during the pandemic. “Everything you read and hear is a blatant lie or twisting

words around. That is not good at all.

“I think workers understand this a lot more than they did before. Even with myself, I’m part of that ... the union officers lie to you blatantly, and you find out about it by reading yourself.”

He spoke about his experience as a new temporary worker. “When I first started out, during orientation, they said, ‘you’re going to make more money than you’ve ever made in your whole life.’ We all kind of joked about it. We looked at each other and gave each other funny looks. We know that’s not true. We know what’s been taken away from the autoworkers over the years.”

He agreed with the analysis of the WSWS that the policy of the corporations and the government was based on the subordination of all other considerations, including human life, to corporate profit. “It’s a shame just seeing how blatantly obvious this is now. It’s been going on for a long time, but now it’s so obvious. They are choosing the economy. If they have to go through another shutdown, they will have big problems, with interest rates and so on. They have to control the narrative; send you to work.

“It’s not even easy to find out who is getting sick, what is going on. It’s not being made public.

“People sometimes have this false belief that the government is going to save us. If my dad was alive and saw how things changed from the 1960s, he’d be shocked too. It’s going to keep going until people stop it.

“People have a hard time speaking out. People need to realize, unless we’re properly organized, nothing good will happen, that’s for sure.

“Everyone is going to be affected one way or another. It doesn’t matter what industry, people are going to keep getting sick, and people will realize, this is a problem.”

The auto companies are poised to make record profits as they scramble to maintain their labor force by compelling children to enter contaminated classrooms and workers onto assembly lines, where some colleagues are known to be working sick.

The new Ford Bronco, for example, (assembled at the Michigan Assembly Plant in Wayne, Michigan just west of Detroit) sells for a whopping \$65,000 with big tires and a custom sound system. The corporation is desperate to fill orders with a current wait time for a new vehicle exceeding 18 months.

At the Faurecia auto parts plant in Saline, which supplies parts to Michigan Assembly, 2,000 production workers are being forced to work under the threat of starvation. A supporter of the rank-and file-committee

there spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter*. The Faurecia Saline Rank-and-File Committee has called for a halt to auto and other nonessential production, with full support for laid off workers, until policies are put in place to contain and eliminate the deadly virus.

“My family can’t survive on two paychecks, and that’s all I’m going to get this month.” Workers are beginning to draw conclusions about the role of the government and the corporations and the unions, he said. “See how the numbers are running. We are not helping our people. The government does whatever the companies want, and they don’t give up any money to stop the pandemic. They just want to make profits.

“They work us one week, and then lay us off the next. And when you try to collect unemployment, they play tricks on you to prevent you from collecting anything. Today the unemployment office made me answer a list of questions that took half an hour, and when I got to the end of it a recording said that the office was not open because of the holiday and hung up on me.

“Everybody has similar problems that aim to prevent us from collecting anything. Something must give. I only get three days paid this week, and we are literally starving.”

He described horrific conditions on the assembly lines in the factory. “There are so many out because of COVID; we are operating with a serious skeleton crew; and we are forced to work mandatory overtime because of it.

“When a worker goes home because of COVID, the supervisor will clean their machines and workstation at lunch. But that is just a ploy. It doesn’t help. If they would sanitize the machines before every shift, it might make a difference, but the way they’re doing it, they might as well not do anything at all.”

With the collusion of the UAW, management is increasing the rate of exploitation to the nth degree. “The contract allows them to work us three weeks straight without a day off. The rumor is that we will be working 10- and 12-hour days nonstop for January, February and March because they are behind on production.”



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