

Stellantis refusing to distribute supply of N95 masks to workers at Sterling Stamping Plant

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Management at Stellantis's Sterling Stamping Plant, located just north of Detroit, is sitting on a stockpile of N95 masks but refusing to distribute them to workers, the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has learned.

Sterling Stamping has been among the harder hit plants during the coronavirus pandemic. At least five workers are confirmed to have died of COVID-19 in 2021 alone. A death notice was recently posted by United Auto Workers Local 1264 for a sixth worker, but the cause of death is not currently known. A seventh worker, Terry Garr, was killed in an industrial accident last spring.

Until the last few months, management at Sterling Stamping and other auto plants distributed surgical masks on a daily basis when shifts began. However, scientists have long recognized that these surgical masks, which often slip down below the nose and have many air gaps, are insufficient to prevent the transmission of the disease. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is spread through exhaled aerosols, which can remain suspended in the air for hours at a time. This fact also severely limits the efficacy of social distancing in enclosed spaces, such as factories and schools, and is one reason why these have served as primary vectors for the spread of the pandemic for the past two years.

This is why the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO) and other bodies have long recommended the use of higher-quality N95 masks. But workers in many plants reported they have been prohibited by management from bringing N95 masks from home,

claiming it is a violation of policy. On top of this, management refuses to enforce mask wearing inside the plants.

Now, masks are not being provided at Sterling Stamping at all. With the support of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, all the piecemeal measures implemented at the start of the pandemic have since been removed, including temperature checks and body scanners at the entrance to the plants. One worker reports it is as common to see coworkers inside the entrance to the facility attempting to borrow masks from other workers.

However, even when surgical masks were being provided, they were used as a business opportunity for the company. Almost one year ago, management at Sterling Stamping began distributing particularly flimsy, low-quality masks which were later revealed to have been produced by Comau LLC, a Stellantis subsidiary specializing in robotics with no experience making surgical equipment. The masks were quietly withdrawn from circulation after this was revealed by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

But even after the withdrawal of its health measures and as COVID-19 continues to spread widely throughout the plant, management is sitting on a little known supply of N95 masks, several workers recently learned.

One worker who attempted to acquire some of these masks was subjected to a byzantine bureaucratic run-around, in which the UAW itself played the leading role. The worker said that the UAW safety man in the plant instructed him to fill out a form requesting a respirator under a pre-pandemic program to provide dust respirators and then to take the form to the medical department. As there is only a single safety man in the plant, this meant the worker had to come in during his

off hours to make the request. But after obtaining the form, one worker reported that baffled nurses informed him that the respirator program had been terminated long ago and that such a form was not necessary.

When confronted, the safety man then claimed that the company would only provide masks under unspecified “extenuating circumstances.” “If the worst medical crisis in the last 100 years is not ‘extenuating circumstances,’ what is?” the worker responded.

Finally, the worker received a formal reply from management, which reads in full:

Currently the company provides the ASTM level 1 masks [surgical masks]. With an ADA accommodation there are KN-95 masks but those will not be given out by supervisors to employees. If the corporate policy changes I will let you know but we will continue to provide the same masks we have been.

In other words, according to the letter, the company is simply refusing, for reasons which it does not explain, to provide masks even in cases where they are requested as part of an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act. In addition to the evident disregard for the health and safety of the workforce, the letter also may indicate that the company is knowingly violating federal law.

This is all the more significant given that N95 masks have never been particularly easy for the general public to obtain, even more than two years into the pandemic. They are frequently not even sold at grocery stores and pharmacies, where surgical masks and even useless cloth masks are sold in abundance. The Biden administration recently announced plans to distribute 400 million free masks, but this is only slightly more than one mask per person in the United States. Moreover, N95s, like surgical masks, are not normally meant to be reused.

While autoworkers must be provided with N95 masks or better, it is simply not possible to operate the plants safely under conditions where the Omicron surge is infecting hundreds of thousands of Americans every day. Workers must demand the closure of nonessential production as well as schools, with full compensation

for laid off workers to prevent further infections and death. A particular appeal should be made by industrial workers to the students and teachers organizing walkouts and protests against the reopening of schools, which is being done solely in a bid by the capitalist ruling class to force parents back to work.

To conduct such a struggle, workers must organize themselves into rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the UAW and other pro-corporate trade unions. Through the formation of these committees workers will be able to organize opposition to the conditions in the plants, share information and scientific knowledge on the pandemic and establish links with workers and youth around the country and the world who are also fighting against the sacrificing of lives to profit.



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