

Ford Kansas City Assembly Plant hammered by spread of COVID-19

Marcus Day
24 January 2022

The Autoworker Newsletter encourages workers to contact us and share information about conditions at your plant. Email us at autoworkers@wsws.org.

In recent weeks, COVID-19 has been spreading out of control at Ford's Kansas City Assembly Plant (KCAP), creating dangerous conditions at the factory and leading to multiple deaths, according to workers at the complex who spoke with the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. The factory employs over 7,000 hourly and salaried workers and is the biggest manufacturing facility in the Kansas City area.

"Masks are not enforced. We have had a ton of deaths," a worker at KCAP wrote in an email to the WSWS. "They have opened access to grief counselors but never tell us how bad COVID is here."

Exact information on the number and identities of workers from KCAP who have succumbed to COVID-19 is difficult to determine, given the unstated policy of the company and the United Auto Workers union to conceal the number of cases and deaths. However, based on word of mouth and death notices posted on social media, workers believe that as many as 10 workers from the plant have died from COVID-19 since the holidays.

"Ten people died at KCAP since Christmas from COVID," a veteran worker at the plant told the WSWS last week. "Heard it from a retired union committeeman. The union did not say anything about it in the plant. They're protecting the company."

One confirmed death from the virus, according to information shared with the WSWS, is Greg Guinn, a millwright at KCAP who died in December.

Daily reported cases in the Kansas City metro area have repeatedly broken records in recent days, averaging between 3,500-4,000, three to four times last winter's peak. With testing capacity overwhelmed,

however, even these numbers reflect only a portion of the virus' full spread, as indicated by the extremely elevated test positivity rates of over 30 percent.

Hospitals in the region, like many parts of the US, continue to be strained to the limit due to the influx of patients infected with the hyper-transmissible Omicron variant. Weekly hospitalizations in Jackson County, where Kansas City, Missouri is located, are averaging an all-time high of 619.

On Friday, the University of Kansas (KU) Health System shared video with the media showing its morgue full of bodies, stating it may soon need to bring in refrigerated trucks, as other cities have done. "We are right at the edge of our capacity any given day about being able to manage the number of deceased patients down there," Dr. Tim Williamson, KU Hospital's vice president of quality and safety, told a local Fox News affiliate.

Workers at KCAP have also said so many are now either sick or self-isolating due to exposure that Ford is struggling to maintain production. Multiple shifts for the facility's Truck Department—which builds the F-150 pickup truck, a linchpin of Ford's profitability—were canceled on Thursday and Friday, according to posts by UAW Local 249.

At the same time, workers have found it increasingly difficult to secure leave from work and self-isolate following exposure to the virus. Some workers have reported that management has said they should report to work after members of their household test positive for COVID, raising the danger of the virus' spread being accelerated.

With the Omicron variant exploding through auto plants and spreading everywhere throughout communities, the companies and the UAW have adopted a de facto "herd immunity" policy of letting

the virus infect as many as possible. On Monday, Ford announced that it was revising its masking policy. Falsely claiming that its flimsy surgical masks “provide effective protection against the spread of COVID-19”—despite the fact that scientists have repeatedly stressed that they are inadequate to fully protect against the airborne virus—Ford said workers could now “wear your own N95 or KN95 respirator,” wear a cloth mask over Ford’s surgical masks, or only wear the surgical mask.

A worker who normally works in the Transit Van Department said that many on his side of the plant were redeployed to the Truck Department recently due to staff shortages. “A couple weeks ago, they had over 200 people off work for COVID. Last year, we had a lot of people on Transit side out with COVID,” he said. “On the Truck side, people work extra close. I had my facemask on at all given times over there, because we were working extra close, side by side.”

“Also, at that plant, I went to the bathroom, and they have a narrow stairway, people rubbing side by side to get past each other.

“I can look and tell that wasn’t a safe place to work at, bro. Right now, they want to keep production running no matter what, no matter how many people are sick with COVID.”

The worker said he was moved by the report on the death of the young autoworker at Ford Chicago Assembly, Caleb Mateo Dye, who recently died after a lengthy battle with COVID-19. “I read that article, he suffered bad. It’s sad to see him losing his life to that, just trying to make some money for his family.

“I truly think it’s not safe to work around that type of environment, it’s risky especially during wintertime. They don’t keep that plant sanitized. It’s like they just don’t care that we’re going to work in that environment. We don’t know how many have been sick.”

Workers still are frequently not informed that they should get tested when a nearby worker tests positive. “When someone comes in to work with COVID, and they’re working next to other employees, when they go to medical, they should allow the other people working next to them to get tested,” the worker said. “It’s creepy that doesn’t happen.”

The UAW has been protecting the company’s interests, not workers, he added. “It’s like the UAW, to

me they’re trying to defend the company, they want us to keep working. The UAW I’m working for, they’re sellouts, it’s true. At the same time, we at Ford KCAP are suffering unemployment, people have been waiting weeks and weeks to get their SUB [supplemental unemployment] paychecks.”

The struggle by teachers and students to force a switch to remote learning is right, the worker said. “I agree they should have kids go back to homeschooling, or internet schooling, especially with this cold weather and everyone indoors. I truly don’t feel safe right now. I think that right now everything should be at a point to where folks should just be away from environments where people are so close together.”

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter is assisting autoworkers in organizing rank-and-file factory committees independent of the UAW. These committees have called for Zero COVID policies, including a shutdown of nonessential production and the payment of workers’ full income during downtime, as well as other necessary public health measures to halt the pandemic and save lives. To get in touch with us about forming or joining a committee, fill out the form below:



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