

# Tower auto parts workers penalized for following COVID safety protocols during Omicron surge

James Martin  
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*Are you an auto parts worker at Tower, Dakotta or Flex-N-Gate? Have you been affected by COVID? What are your working conditions like? Contact us and share your story today. Workers' identities will be kept confidential.*

At the height of the Omicron surge over the last few months, auto parts workers at Tower International's Chicago factory, a supplier to Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant, were penalized for following company safety protocols as COVID spread throughout the plant and across the region.

Management at the plant would use a widely hated attendance system to punish those who called off work because they were experiencing COVID symptoms but who subsequently tested negative, multiple workers told the WSW. As a result, many would come to work feeling sick or having been recently exposed, the workers said, almost certainly exacerbating the spread of COVID in the plant.

Managers and supervisors at Tower ignored even the limited official company policies and the weakened safety guidelines by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Late last December, the CDC cut down quarantine times from 10 to five days, a corporate-backed move that was widely seen by disease experts as unscientific and dangerous.

Large signs inside the Tower Chicago facility stated that if workers "have a fever of 100.4 or more, cough, shortness of breath (difficulty breathing or tightness in chest)," or "have been diagnosed with COVID-19; (or are waiting for test results) within the last 14 days," then they were not to enter the facility, and instead leave the plant, call the attendance hotline and await follow-up from Human Resources.

Despite such guidelines, workers who exhibited symptoms were docked attendance points if their tests came back negative as they stayed home to quarantine during the Omicron surge.

"If an hourly employee needs to be quarantined, the employer will give the employee attendance point violations if the employee's COVID results come back negative," one Tower employee told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"This treatment has caused many COVID-infected coworkers not to inform the employer that they have COVID or have been exposed," he added. "Many coworkers have been infected with the virus. The employer's COVID rules are posted where one can see. We should not have to be afraid of losing our jobs just because we are following the employer's and CDC guidelines."

"I was literally crying on the line while I was working," said another Tower worker, Isabella, in an extensive interview with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. Isabella's name has been changed to protect her identity.

When Isabella decided to quarantine due to potential COVID exposure in her family, and as cases shot up exponentially across Chicago and the rest of the country, she said she was badgered and harassed by

management to return to work.

"I was so stressed out and they kept harassing me. And I knew they were harassing me. I have everything documented and all conversations recorded. Every text is recorded. I recorded everything with the COVID testing harassment.

"Nobody should go through that. I told them, 'You're not going to walk all over me.'"

## Tower's business operations and conditions for workers

Tower International is an original equipment manufacturer that supplies parts for multinational automotive companies. Tower workers produce chassis structures and full frame assemblies as well as other suspension components and systems that are used to build cars and sport utility vehicles.

Currently headquartered in Livonia, Michigan, Tower has over 5,700 employees and took in over \$1.6 billion in revenue in 2018. There are over 14 Tower manufacturing facilities located in the United States, Mexico and Brazil. Locations in the US include factories in Chicago, Illinois; Plymouth, Michigan; Clinton, Michigan; Elkton, Michigan; Bluffton, Ohio; and Bellevue, Ohio.

Tower sold off its European operations in 2019 to shift back to North America, citing difficult conditions for business growth, *Crain's Detroit Business* reported.

According to Tower's annual reports filed with US regulators in 2019, Ford Motor Company makes up nearly half of its business. Another 22 percent takes place with Stellantis and 12 percent with Nissan Motor Company. The company also works with Toyota, BMW, the Volkswagen Group and Honda Motor Company.

In September 2019, Tower was acquired by Autokiniton US Holdings, Inc., a subsidiary of the global private equity firm KPS Capital Partners, LP, which controls over \$5 billion in assets.

Workers at Tower plants face brutal sweatshop conditions, which the United Auto Workers (UAW) union has facilitated and enforced over decades in the auto and auto parts industries.

A series of strikes by workers in the auto parts industry were betrayed by the UAW in the 1980s and 90s, which helped lower costs for the Big Three and the rest of the auto industry.

By the 1990s, the Big Three companies increasingly outsourced manufacturing of their parts to third-party suppliers like Tower, which allowed them to impose extreme levels of exploitation, poverty wages and conditions of industrial slavery—with the collaboration of the UAW.

Tower emerged as a major auto parts supplier in the 1990s through a wave of mergers and acquisitions, quickly expanding and moving to international markets.

In 2005, however, Tower filed for bankruptcy, citing growing steel prices, and came under the ownership of private equity firm Cerberus Capital Management, which would go on to sell its shares of the company for an \$81.3 million initial public offering.

When Tower restructured under bankruptcy protection in 2006, the UAW and the United Steel Workers (USW) unions helped impose cuts to wages and benefits, including higher health care costs, on Tower workers. Then-UAW president Bob King defended the company's interests during the restructuring, telling the press at the time, "Our goal now is to help this company emerge from bankruptcy and return as a strong player in the U.S. auto industry."

The UAW's concessions created dangerous working conditions for Tower workers. In 2014, a contractor was electrocuted at one of Tower's facilities in the Detroit area. The UAW did not even bother to report the worker's death on its site at the time.

Currently, the UAW and USW negotiate separate contracts for each Tower factory, further isolating workers and facilitating the company's efforts to drive down wages and benefits.

According to details obtained by the WSWS of the 2020-2023 contract agreement at the Chicago Tower facility, new hires in the most common job classifications only make Chicago's minimum wage of \$15 an hour.

A worker who started in 2019 before the pandemic only makes about \$15.75 an hour, a poverty wage. The trade unions, including the UAW, have worked with the companies to impose cuts in real wages, as prices surge for food, gas and other items.

The low wages and brutal conditions during the pandemic confronting Tower workers have become widespread in the auto parts industry, which have generated increasing anger and resistance among workers. In late 2020, workers at a Lear Seating plant in northwest Indiana, which also supplies Ford Chicago Assembly, conducted a wildcat work stoppage after they learned of potential COVID-19 cases at the plant.

Last year, Dana auto parts workers, who work 80 hours a week or more, waged a courageous fight to oppose a UAW- and USW-backed concessions contract, voting down an initial union-backed agreement by 90 percent. In order to overcome the pro-company maneuvering of the unions, Dana workers organized their own independent rank-and-file committee, in an effort to unite workers across plants and to fight for major wage increases, a 40-hour work week and safe working conditions during the pandemic.

### **Tower Automotive: "It's slavery inside a box!"**

Reviews by employees of the Chicago facility on the employment website Indeed.com highlight the extreme levels of exploitation Tower workers face.

One worker noted recently, "Work is very repetitive. You're doing the same thing every day changing between 2-3 stations. They want you to get a high number every day, but no incentive to obtain the goal. Even if you hit your goal every day for a month or more they just expect you to keep getting it while they take all your coworkers that know the positions and give you new people that you have to train while producing the same workload."

The worker added that there are only "short breaks" and "no way to run to the bathroom in case of an emergency. Managers [also] mistreat you."

Another worker said, "If you love overtime this is the place to be. Management doesn't care about the employees and they make you work

overtime every day without notice. They also changed your schedule without notice. You can be the best employee ever but as soon as you get hurt all that goes out the window they kick you to the curb and don't care about your well-being."

"Yes Master! Another hot day in the field," stated another worker sarcastically in September 2019. "It's slavery inside a box! People have died working here. Gotten sick! And broke their bodies in this place. Just to be mistreated and disrespected."

### **Tower workers in Chicago face Omicron surge**

During the recent surge of the Omicron variant, caseloads skyrocketed throughout the Chicago metropolitan area. There were over 13,000 cases a day in early January in Cook County, Illinois, where Chicago is located, at the height of the surge. These figures, as with those nationally and internationally, were widely acknowledged by infectious disease experts to be underestimates.

Many testing sites, meanwhile, were overwhelmed by the surge of cases. Workers at Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) on the city's Far South Side complained of not being able to use at-home test kits to obtain company-approved leave from work, even as they struggled to find PCR testing locations, a disaster out of their control.

On January 13, Chicago Ford worker Caleb Mateo Dye died of COVID-19. The 32-year-old had been hospitalized with a COVID infection since December 10. His death prompted an outpouring of sympathy from his fellow Ford workers and as well as outrage among workers more broadly.

The Omicron variant spread throughout Ford's facility and among workers at its parts suppliers, including Tower workers nearby.

"I was double-vaccinated and got a booster," said one Tower employee. "But I still got exposed to the virus. You'll get pointed if you test negative. That's causing a lot of people to show up because they're on their last points. The employers got the big sign saying 'don't come in if you have symptoms, colds,' etc."

"I've worked at Tower Automotive for 18 years," the worker added, speaking of his experience. "Tower is located in southeast Chicago, right across from Chicago Assembly Plant. About 2003 is when they laid the groundwork. The manufacturing campus was originally designed to be on the same manufacturing campus as CAP, to save on costs. It was modeled after the Japanese supplier model, where they are across the street.

"Dakota Integrated Systems is another company on the campus. There's also a nonunion company called Flex-N-Gate. They're really having problems with COVID too. One person died from Dakota Integrated Systems. There was a brother over there who caught the virus and died when the pandemic began.

"Tower makes the rear floor assembly for Chicago Assembly. That's our only customer, Ford. We do stamping with the large presses. We make the rails. Tower makes the chassis. We have about 298 union workers there."

"Tower doesn't follow their own safety policies with COVID. The same things I hear at Ford's Chicago Assembly are going on at Tower. The union reps at Tower were bombarded weekly [during the surge]... 'Somebody got tested positive,' they would say. Workers would have symptoms and test positive.

"The employer wouldn't let them go and workers would say, 'But I'm sick.' Then, the company says you can't leave and if you come back with a negative test, you get an attendance point. It's a lot of pressure on people if you think you might be positive to come back.

"At the beginning of the pandemic, they said if you think you have any

of the COVID symptoms, you should go get tested. Workers would go get tested. If they received negative results, they'd go back to work. Nobody was abusing it. Very few people would call off or say that they tested positive.

"Then they started threatening people when they tested negative, and management gave them points. That's when the surge of COVID happened. They continued to work while they waited on test results because they didn't want to get attendance points.

He added that workers at Tower have only been supplied with ineffective surgical masks. Despite being the most commonly used masks in many workplaces, repeated studies have shown that they do not provide adequate protection against the coronavirus, which can remain in the air for hours in aerosolized form. "I'm the only one with an N95 mask," the worker added. According to aerosol and infectious disease scientists, N95 masks are the most effective masks against COVID aerosols, along with other respirator masks.

He concluded, noting the brutal working conditions, "It's six days a week. It's 10-hour days. When we first started, we worked straight 12-hour days, seven days a week.

"We see coworkers more than we see our families. You come home, kiss your wife, eat dinner, go to sleep, go see the workers you work with, not your wife. That's your life. We're giving Tower our lives, not just our work. These are human bodies."

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