

Tower auto parts worker describes management harassment during COVID quarantine: “You’re basically owned by Tower”

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.

During the peak of the Chicago area’s Omicron surge in mid-January, there were over 13,000 daily average cases in Cook County, where the city is located. As cases skyrocketed, testing capacity became overwhelmed, with many people facing significant delays in getting their results or difficulty in finding appointments to get tested at all. Seeking to take advantage of the chaos in the health system, a number of unscrupulous and fraudulent “pop-up” testing sites also mushroomed across the city and the country. Officially, over 14,606 people have died to date from COVID in Cook County.

The colossal loss of life, with the death toll in the US rapidly approaching one million, is the consequence of the profit-driven “herd immunity” policies pursued by corporations and their political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties. The trade unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW), meanwhile, have played the critical role in enforcing these policies, keeping workers on the job during the pandemic and covering up the number of COVID cases and deaths, in line with their decades-long integration into corporate management.

Isabella, a Tower Automotive worker in Chicago whose name has been changed to protect her identity, says she faced harassment from the company over her COVID quarantine under these disastrous conditions. The plant she works at is an auto parts supplier to Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant on the South Side of Chicago.

“I’m going on my third year at Tower,” Isabella said of her experience at Tower International, an auto parts sweatshop, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“It has been horrible and stressful to work in that environment. You walk in there and it’s stressful all day, dealing with Human Resources that’s unprofessional, supervisors that are unprofessional. Every day you’re constantly being watched by supervisors and HR.”

Tower workers, who only get 20 hours of paid personal time off every year, face a punitive attendance points system, both products of the UAW union’s sweetheart contracts with the company. “You’re not allowed to go to the bathroom unless they say so,” Isabella said. “You have to wear all your safety equipment all the time. Even if you make an honest mistake, they’ll harass you. Points are a way of screwing you over. After a certain amount of points, you’ll get terminated. They’ll try to point you for any reason.”

“All they care about are the numbers for the day. It’s just a very

stressful environment. We work six days a week for 65 hours. You only get one day off. But, see, the thing is they’ll give you a schedule every week and they’ll say you’re scheduled from Monday through Thursday. Okay, you’re off Saturday. That last Thursday of the week they’ll tell you to work Friday. Even if you have other plans for your life.

“Basically, they control you,” she pointed out. “They control your every move. You’re basically owned by Tower. That’s how I feel.”

“All they care about is the numbers, even if the machines go down and it’s beyond your control. You turn around, the supervisor is there, the HR person is there.”

“They’ll throw you to the machines”

When asked what her day to day work is like, she said, “I do a little bit of everything. They put you wherever they put you. They don’t train you for the job and they expect you to learn it within 15-20 minutes and they expect you to keep the numbers on green. And if you go on red, they’ll harass you. Mind you, in the contract [with the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Tower], they say you have to be trained for a certain number of days. But they’ll throw you to the dogs. They’ll throw you to the machines. They don’t care.”

“I hurry up at work all the time. I learned almost all the jobs in the factory in zones 1, 2, and 3. Basically the robots do all the work. But it’s tricky. You put one part, a simple part or a big part in the machine, then they make you do three different jobs at a time. You’re going back and forth for three different jobs.

“It’s non-stop running back and forth for 11 hours. It’s exhausting. You have to catch on to the machines too because they work at a certain pace. Even if you go to one part, you have to go back to the second part.”

Isabella pointed to the fact that Tower tries to push out workers by grinding them down over time. “It’s crazy,” she said. “The end of my second year, the jobs were not like that. You were only assigned to two jobs at a time. Now they’re getting so greedy with their money and they’re cutting people off. They’ll point to any given reason to fire you.

“They’ll find temp workers to replace you. That factory is almost full of temps. There’s a union contract we just got, and in the fifth year you max out. They don’t want that, so they want to assign them to temps. That’s what they’re trying to do to us.”

“People were sick, sick, sick”

“When the mandates happened, they were firing people for not wearing a mask,” Isabella said. “I walked in and they gave out fresh masks. If you walk in without a mask by accident they terminate you. They terminated three people one day when I had a baby.

“When the pandemic first started, we were laid off automatically. When we came back, they were being really strict with masks and making sure everything was sanitized, which was good. Then this year and last year, that’s when everything hit the fan. They didn’t care about sanitizing. They didn’t care if people were positive, and that leads to my situation.”

Isabella initially got an antigen test, which she didn’t realize was not acceptable as a test result. She then sought to get a more accurate PCR test, which was very difficult to get during the Omicron surge. Throughout the process she was hounded by HR to produce her results, which she struggled to get in a timely manner.

Human Resources at Tower cited the CDC’s change to its guidelines to reduce quarantine times from 10 to five days in justifying a rapid return to work, Isabella said. The move by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, was a completely unscientific and corporate-backed decision to force workers back to work in the midst of the dangerous surge of the Omicron variant that reached over 1 million cases a day at the peak and from 2,000 to 3,000 deaths a day on average.

At the same time, Tower management ignored the company’s own policies on COVID-19 safety, employees at the plant have asserted. Isabella said, “They didn’t let me quarantine for the correct amount of days. After you do the quarantine, you’re supposed to test if you’re clear. They said come back to work before the period. When I came back, there were so many positive people. There were symptoms of [it] everywhere, coughing, headache. People were sick, sick, sick. Half the plant was sick.”

“That was my issue with them,” she said about the pressure she faced to return to work. “I tested negative in December, but my ex-fiancé tested positive on the same day. My baby and my ex’s baby tested positive. Everybody else tested negative on the quick tests in my family.”

Isabella said that she informed HR that several of her family and household members had tested positive, and that she was awaiting results of her own test. Several days later, she was still awaiting her test results, and was experiencing a fever and loss of taste and smell. Despite this, and the fact that members of her family had tested positive, HR encouraged her to return to work, she said.

“I asked them, ‘So you want me to report back to work even though we have multiple people who might all have COVID?’ They said, ‘Yes, the CDC shortened the testing period.’”

Like others at Tower, Isabella said she had previously been penalized for calling off work to quarantine—a basic and necessary public health measure—while she awaited COVID test results which turned out to be negative. “Last time I got tested,” she added, “I got pointed because I tested negative. The main HR lady said if you test negative you’re pointed, if you test positive, you go on quarantine. So if you test negative they penalize you!

“If I don’t follow the instructions, you will discipline me. If I test negative, you will penalize me. Damned if I do, damned if I don’t. And I was dying here.”

“Once we team up, they can’t walk all over us.”

Isabella continued to be hounded and mistreated by management

throughout the process.

“All they care about are their numbers. All they care about is working you like a slave. They’re supposed to retest you after you test positive. They don’t. They just send you to work.

“Almost the whole plant was positive. People were literally coughing in the lunchroom. The day that I tested positive, they didn’t sanitize when I got back in. All they care about is doing 750 parts every night. Even the superintendent tested positive and he was still there driving a forklift. It’s bad there. They don’t care about you.”

Isabella’s child also became significantly ill with COVID, contradicting the claims of the Biden administration and pro-corporate academics that children are largely immune to the virus. “My baby was dying in my arms with this damn COVID. These people don’t care. He was breathing so hard. I had to take him to the hospital. I was so ready to leave my job...OSHA this, CDC that, they’re not even following that. These people are a joke.”

Exposure to COVID completely changed Isabella’s outlook on vaccinations. She said, “I was one of those people that didn’t believe in vaccinations. Now I’m afraid. I’m afraid to catch COVID. I’m so scared that my baby is going to catch COVID again. That was one of the worst days of my life, seeing my baby get COVID.

“I was one of those people that thought COVID was not real, but then it hit my family. Holy s—t. I will never say anything like that again. Imagine if we both got it at the same time and I couldn’t care for him?!”

When this reporter spoke to Isabella about the effective Zero COVID strategy implemented in China that only resulted in two deaths in 2021, she responded, “They did it the correct way. China did their job so that they no longer have COVID again. Chicago can’t get it together.

“COVID could have been avoided if we had followed the guidelines. Now jobs, schools, they don’t care. They cut it down from 10 to five days because they’re too cheap to pay them. COVID is not going away. Who’s going to quarantine in five days and be okay? I’m still recovering from COVID.”

There’s growing opposition among workers at Tower and across the country to the exploitation they have faced under the pandemic. “People are getting tired of it,” Isabella said. “Oh hell no you’re not going to walk over me—there’s a lot of people feeling like that.

“Once we start teaming up, little by little, the whole factory, they can’t walk over us. I tell them y’all need to speak up.”

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