Monkeypox reported at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant as infections rise across Detroit area

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The first case of monkeypox has been reported at Stellantis' Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit, a source has told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. No official announcement has been made by either management or the United Autoworkers.

The infection was announced in team meetings last week by management, but the company has taken no measures to quarantine potentially exposed workers or otherwise block transmission in the giant factory. The case took place in General Assembly, one of the most crowded areas in the sprawling plant, which employs over 7,000 people.

The report of a monkeypox case at Sterling Heights Assembly poses not just a risk to the 7,000 Stellantis employees who work there, but to the wider population in the vast surrounding metropolitan area. The disease can spread through skin-to-skin contact as well as aerosols. It can spread through contaminated fabric and surfaces, and the virus can remain alive for weeks outside the body. Contrary to the claim that monkeypox is a threat mainly to gay men, past studies indicate that over 40 percent of infections occur among women.

As for the claim that monkeypox is not a serious illness, studies from Africa where the disease is endemic show it has a case fatality rate similar to that of COVID-19. Some 10 percent of those infected require hospitalization due to the severe symptoms, including excruciating pain. The virus, which is related to smallpox although less deadly, can cause severe lesions on any part of the body, including the face, and can cause blindness or asphyxiation. Permanent and disfiguring scars can result.

The report is another worrisome sign that monkeypox is spreading widely in the Detroit area. Detroit proper reported 17 cases as of August 7. That brings to 50 the number of cases in the metro area, including Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. The state of Michigan reports 72 cases in total.

Given the lack of testing and monitoring, these numbers are likely a vast undercount. The Biden administration only declared a public health emergency August 4, almost three months after the first case was reported in the US. As with the initial reports of COVID-19 infections in early 2020, the US government and public health agencies have sought to downplay the seriousness of the situation and have promoted misleading and false information.

Michigan's chief medical executive Dr. Natasha Bagdasarian said in a television interview Sunday that she was confident the state can still limit transmission of monkeypox. However, given the disastrous response of the authorities to COVID-19, no one should accept this.

Likewise, it is highly probable that there are far more cases in the auto plants than the single reported case at SHAP. For more than two years, management and the United Auto Workers have systematically covered up the spread of COVID-19 in the plants, forcing workers to rely on word of mouth. Factories and other large workplaces, together with schools, are the primary driver of outbreaks in the state of Michigan according

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to official figures.

With the reopening of public schools in a few weeks the danger is multiplied. Already a number of children have been infected with monkeypox, and that number is sure to rise. This takes place under conditions where the Detroit Community Public Schools and other school systems around the US are lifting even limited COVID-19 safety protocols.

Management and the UAW have eliminated all precautions related to COVID-19, despite the high number of cases and deaths, with over 65,000 cases and 500 deaths in Michigan in July according to Worldometer. Now they are trying to downplay, and in fact ignore, the threat posed by monkeypox. As with COVID-19, the main concern of Stellantis and their UAW stooges is to prevent any disruption to production in order to keep profits rolling in, health and safety be damned.

Workers should recall that in March 2020, temporary lockdowns in the auto industry and other limited safety measures were only taken after workers carried out wildcat strikes at SHAP and other auto plants in defiance of the UAW.

As with COVID-19, the insatiable demand of Wall Street for profits makes a rational response on the part of capitalist governments to the monkeypox emergency impossible. While an effective vaccine exists, there are only limited stocks, with the holder of the patent unable to ramp up production to the level needed and unwilling to relinquish its intellectual property rights to allow mass production and distribution of the vaccine in the US and globally.

Since testing for the virus is a slow and difficult process, contact tracing and isolation are critical for containment. However, employers will not permit workers the four-to-eight-week isolation period needed to clear the virus for infected or exposed individuals. That means that sick workers will face the choice of returning to the factory or office and infecting their coworkers, or confronting unemployment.

The spread of monkeypox alongside the as-yet uncontained COVID-19 pandemic are an indictment of the capitalist system. Despite enormous advances in medical science that make the elimination of deadly disease entirely feasible, the overriding concerns of big business block any effective action.

It is up to workers to take matters into their own hands through the building of rank-and-file factory and workplace safety committees, independent of the pro-management unions, to oversee and enforce safe conditions. Workers must insist on the right to a healthy workplace and effective measures of quarantine and contact tracing as well as the right to shut down production in case of an outbreak.

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