

Monkeypox reported at General Motors' Wentzville plant, suspected at Flint Assembly

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On Friday, August 19, workers at the General Motors assembly plant in Wentzville, Missouri, located near St. Louis, were informed by management that a coworker had tested positive for monkeypox.

A letter from the plant executive director, Lamar Rucker, which a worker shared with the *World Socialist Web Site*, stated:

To communicate transparently and respond to employee concerns, our leadership team wants to address a confirmed Monkeypox case in our plant. Here are the facts:

On Tuesday August 9, a 1st shift Trim employee **did the right thing** and promptly reported to his personal physician with symptoms.

Medical was notified and has been awaiting test results which have now been confirmed.

Out of an abundance of caution, we have thoroughly disinfecting the employee's work area and Medical has assessed the risk in the employee's work area. It was determined there was minimal contact and interaction with others therefore a low risk for workplace transmission per CDC guidelines. Cleaning supplies remain readily available for all employees.

The letter proceeds to cavalierly assert: "Monkeypox is NOT highly contagious. Disease transmission occurs through prolonged skin-to-skin contact (typical

handshakes, fist-bumps, etc. are not considered a concern for spread)."

A virtually identical letter was sent to workers at GM's Flint Assembly plant in Michigan over the weekend, stating that there was a suspected case of monkeypox identified on Friday, August 26. The individual who experienced symptoms works the third shift in Chassis and was still awaiting test results, according to the statement.

More than 5,800 workers are employed at the giant GM Flint Assembly plant, while over 4,000 work at GM Wentzville.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) has not released a public statement on either the confirmed or the suspected case of monkeypox, in line with its efforts over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic to suppress information about the spread of the coronavirus and to ensure production and the flow of profits continue uninterrupted. To date, the word "monkeypox" has yet to even appear on the UAW's website.

A worker at Wentzville Assembly told the WSWS that workers are concerned that monkeypox may be circulating more widely than management is letting on. "People are saying, 'Can you believe there's a monkeypox case? Probably more than one.' They're not telling us the truth. There's got to be more. People are just done with this whole situation."

The worker said that COVID-19 also remains a major concern and risk to workers' health and lives, yet neither management nor the UAW are providing any serious protections. "St. Charles County [where Wentzville is located] is supposed to be a high risk, but they're not saying anything about whether we would wear a mask. I know people who've had COVID twice and three times."

The monkeypox case at GM Wentzville is at least the second confirmed case in an auto plant in the US. Earlier

in August, a case was reported at the Stellantis (Chrysler) Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in the Detroit area. Unconfirmed reports circulated a few days later of two more suspected cases.

Monkeypox is often an extremely painful and potentially deadly disease, with a case fatality rate historically on par with COVID-19. The virus produces lesions on the skin, along with other symptoms such as fever, headache, chills and swollen lymph nodes.

Contrary to misinformation circulated by reactionary and fascistic forces, monkeypox is not just a sexually transmitted infection, nor is it limited to men who have sex with men.

While scientists are still working to understand the disease more clearly—and direct skin-to-skin contact and respiratory droplets appear to be the most common form of transmission—monkeypox has shown to be able to spread via aerosols (microscopic particles which can hang in the air) and contact with contaminated surfaces. Moreover, compromised immune systems—a potential consequence of infection or repeated infection with COVID-19—can heighten the risk of infection with monkeypox.

The seven-day average of daily new cases has hovered around 450 in the US since early August, accounting for nearly half the daily cases being reported worldwide, although with tests frequently hard to attain, the figures are no doubt a substantial undercount. As of August 26, 17,336 cases had been reported in the US and 48,227 globally, according to Our World in Data. Vaccines, meanwhile, remain in extremely limited supply.

Monkeypox cases in Michigan, according to state data, climbed 47 percent in a week, larger than the national growth of 31 percent. Between August 16 and August 24, Wayne County, which is part of the Detroit metro area, added 26 new cases for a total of 68. Oakland County climbed from 18 cases to 29, and Macomb County increased from 13 to 19.

The reopening of schools to in-person learning, under conditions of the simultaneous COVID-19 and monkeypox pandemics, has the potential to fuel the spread of both and worsen what is already a disastrous public health crisis.

Workers should demand that every scientific measure be taken in order to protect them from these preventable diseases, including contact tracing, the provision of high-quality N95 masks, and the emergency shutdown of plants if workers deem conditions unsafe, with full income provided.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and candidate for UAW International president this year, issued a statement earlier in August demanding such measures be taken after the first monkeypox case was reported at Sterling Heights Assembly. Denouncing the UAW bureaucracy for doing nothing to protect workers, he urged workers to form rank-and-file committees in order to fight to ensure their safety, stating:

I call for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every auto plant and workplace to oversee health and safety and other workplace conditions.

We need to build a network of rank-and-file committees to link up autoworkers everywhere, including with our brothers and sisters overseas. We cannot allow COVID and now monkeypox to continue to spread in our workplaces and society as a whole.

A young second shift worker at GM Flint Assembly told the WSWS, “I heard about the monkeypox report first from a co-worker on Saturday. She had just received a text from management. It was pretty late into our shift. We were both very angry about hearing this for the first time, since the message said the case was known on Friday, August 26.

“They’re not doing anything to prevent this, except wiping surfaces here and there. I was not contacted by anyone from management or the union. Nothing! No one! It says to me that communicating this way serves to minimize the danger and the spread of monkeypox. There is no contact tracing. Their message claims the worker had no contact with us. This cannot be verified!

“It’s the same way they handle COVID. They deny cases occur in the plant. And like COVID, there are no measures to protect us. The lines are big, dozens and dozens of workers, but there is no way to know if any of us were near the worker, or touched the work station where he or she was working.”



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