

Shut down plants and workplaces amidst spreading toxic air!

International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees
16 July 2026

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) demands the immediate shutdown of all non-essential plants and workplaces across areas engulfed in toxic wildfire smoke, with full pay for every worker affected. No worker should be compelled to breathe poisoned air for the sake of corporate profit.

Toxic air is the reality confronting millions across the US and Canada right now. Wildfires burning throughout Canada and northern Minnesota have blanketed Toronto, Minneapolis, Chicago, New York City, Detroit and other cities in a thick layer of smoke and ash, producing some of the worst air quality of any major population center in recorded history.

Across large areas, the Air Quality Index (AQI) has climbed above 500—the nominal maximum of the scale. The monitoring service IQAir recorded an overall AQI for Detroit of 698, the worst of any major city on earth Thursday. Local monitors exceeded 900 in parts of northern Minnesota, and one in Detroit reached 917. A reading of only 300 constitutes a “health warning of emergency conditions.”

This occurs amid a major heatwave, fuelled by climate change, with temperatures driven above 100 degrees across much of the region, a combination producing apocalyptic conditions for the tens of millions of workers forced to labor without protection from either. Michigan sits at the center of the disaster. The same state is also the epicenter of a cyclosporiasis outbreak that has sickened thousands, one expression among many of a collapse of public health.

An emergency alert pushed to cellphones across Metro Detroit Thursday warned residents to “stay indoors when possible, keep windows and doors closed, and limit outdoor activity and exertion.” But millions of workers were sent to work anyway—outdoors, or inside facilities with no filtration and no protection from the very air the government was telling everyone to avoid.

The *Detroit Free Press* reported Thursday that smoke and heat of 88 to 100 degrees filled Ford’s Michigan Assembly Plant in Wayne throughout the night and into the morning.

Several dozen workers on the line went to the plant’s medical unit, and some were taken out on stretchers by ambulance to hospitals, the paper reported. Two union supervisors confirmed at least 10 hospital runs. A worker said there were roughly a dozen more at Ford’s Dearborn Truck Plant.

A worker at Stellantis’ Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit described the conditions Thursday afternoon to the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Horrible—eyes burning, fumes, cloudy. It’s terrible honestly.” Another said workers could not see across the plant the night before; management closed the loading dock doors, but “there is no AC or air filters” to clear the smoke already inside. At Nexteer, 188 workers called off on Wednesday rather than labor in dangerous conditions.

While those with heart and lung conditions are especially vulnerable, the conditions now facing millions are rated “hazardous” for everyone in the affected areas, carrying the risk of chronic illness—asthma, diabetes, along with heightened danger of stroke and heart disease.

Smaller particles (less than PM2.5) are especially deadly because they are small enough to bypass the body’s defenses, lodge deep in the lungs and pass into the bloodstream, where they can trigger not only respiratory attacks but heart attacks and strokes. Official AQI readings also do not account for the toxic particles released by burning plastics and metals, which is a growing hazard as fires increasingly reach built structures.

Poor air quality is among the most lethal conditions on earth. UNICEF estimates that at least 8.1 million people die prematurely every year from air pollution—including more than 700,000 children under five—from pneumonia, asthma and low birth weight.

Virtually every section of the working class has been struck by these deadly conditions. Postal and UPS workers have been sent onto their routes without water, air conditioning or any accommodation, even as heat and smoke combine into compounding hazards. Construction and agricultural workers remain outdoors. Even indoor workers,

including in hospitals, report laboring without air conditioning, filtration or proper protective equipment.

While governments have issued warnings about the smoke, the entire burden has been placed on individuals to “limit outdoor activity” and “consider wearing” a mask. There has been no mass distribution of N95 masks, Corsi-Rosenthal boxes or HEPA filters, nor any establishment of clean-air shelters for the low-income and homeless.

These life-threatening conditions are the product of the dismantling of public health agencies and networks by capitalist governments across the planet. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic became the signal to gut every institution designed to prevent the spread of disease, regulate air and water and protect human health.

The process, implemented under both Democrats and Republicans, has accelerated under Trump’s second term, which has gutted the public health agencies wholesale. The administration has dismantled the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and reversed every limited measure against climate change. The horrific conditions now sweeping North America have become the new normal for weeks each summer, and are set to worsen in the years ahead.

The trade union bureaucracy has not lifted a finger to protect workers’ health and lives. As workers collapse on the line, the UAW stands by and does nothing. UAW President Shawn Fain issued a plea calling on “employers to put health and safety of all workers first,” while proposing to do absolutely nothing.

The union’s own contract exposes whose interests the apparatus defends. Under the “act of God” language the UAW negotiated, workers receive only reduced pay when a plant is closed for a natural disaster—and a worker who walks off the job to save his own lungs “could receive three days off without pay.” The apparatus that signed away the right to leave a hazardous plant now offers “information” and appeals to management while workers are carried out on stretchers.

This inaction mirrors the unions’ response to COVID-19 in 2020, when they kept the plants open as a deadly pathogen spread. Then, as now, the bureaucracies functioned not as instruments of the working class but as adjuncts of corporate management, enforcing labor discipline. The initial 2020 lockdowns were forced only by the wildcat actions of workers themselves, above all in auto, who shut down production acting independently of and against both management and the union apparatus.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees calls on workers across the US and Canada to take matters into their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file committees to shut production. Workers should hold discussion and meetings online to elect a rank-and-file

leadership and agree on a common program of action. The IWA-RFC proposes that these committees demand:

- **A halt to production at every affected non-essential workplace**, with no loss of pay for workers impacted, and the immediate provision, at company expense, of properly fitted N95 or P100 respirators to every worker still required to work.

- **An emergency program to install high-quality air filtration and air conditioning in every plant, warehouse and workplace.** That auto factories generating billions in profit are operated without functioning ventilation or climate control—leaving workers to breathe smoke and labor in 100-degree heat—is an indictment of the entire profit system.

- **Independent, worker-run monitoring of air quality inside every workplace**, published to all workers in real time, rather than left to the discretion of management, complicit union officials or gutted regulatory agencies.

- **For workers’ control over safety and health in the factories!** As long as such decisions are left in the hands of management, workers will be continually exposed to unsafe conditions, as well as the risk of serious workplace injury.

These demands cannot be won through appeals to corporate boards, government agencies or union officials who have already shown their contempt for workers’ lives. They require the independent organization of the working class, prepared to act on its own initiative against a system that treats workers’ health and lives as the mere cost of doing business.

Capitalism, organized around competing nation-states and private profit, is incapable of responding to a crisis that crosses every border on the continent. Smoke from the Canadian and Minnesota fires does not recognize the boundary between Ontario and Michigan, nor the difference between a unionized auto plant and a non-union warehouse.

Protecting human life from wildfires, disease and climate catastrophe requires reorganizing economic life on a global scale to serve social need rather than private profit—that is, the fight for socialism.

We urge workers who agree with the need to form rank-and-file committees to contact the IWA-RFC today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact