

”Workers health issues are being ignored for the sake of production”

As wildfire smoke engulfs factories and workplaces, workers demand lives before profit

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As hazardous wildfire smoke blanketed large swaths of the US and Canada this week, millions of workers were forced to report to smoke filled factories and worksites under pain of docked pay or dismissal.

Air quality alerts have been issued in nearly two dozen US states as well as six Canadian provinces. Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and parts of New York as well as Toronto have been in the very unhealthy or hazardous range, with some of the worst air quality in the world. While sporting events and festivals have been cancelled due to health concerns and the public advised to stay indoors if at all possible, only a handful of employers have halted operations.

While conditions may mitigate somewhat over the weekend, hazardous conditions are likely to return as the wildfires rage out of control.

Workers posting on social media and writing in to the *World Socialist Web Site* presented a dystopian picture of workers literally choking in smoke-filled workplaces and being carried out of factories on stretchers. Others reported burning eyes and throats, headaches and lightheadedness.

The various trade union bureaucracies have either said nothing as the crisis unfolded or issued press releases parroting management assurances that they were monitoring the situation and that workers’ health and safety was “our top priority,” while doing nothing to protect workers, let alone halt production.

Perhaps most notable for its sheer cynicism was the statement posted late Thursday evening by UAW President Shawn Fain. The UAW chief currently under federal investigation, and who faces reelection this year, waited more than 24-hours after hazardous smoke started filling Detroit area auto plants before intervening. This followed reports that local television affiliates had been flooded with calls from distraught workers forced to labor under hazardous conditions, watching co workers sicken and collapse from the combined impact of heat and smoke.

Fain, wrote, “UAW treats the health and safety of all workers with the utmost importance, and we urge all employers to do the same,” saying he had put the UAW Health and Safety Department on high alert... He then stated, “Many UAW workers are already subjected to working in extreme heat where doors at their worksite

cannot be closed. This compounded with hazardous air quality creates an unsafe work environment.”

Instead of calling for an immediate halt to production and the evacuation of this unsafe environment, he instead appealed to management to do the right thing, “We call on employers to put health and safety of all workers first; including shutting down work if hazardous air quality cannot be mitigated with HVAC systems and PPE.”

This groveling statement evoked an outpouring of anger from workers. Lisa, wrote, “It’s real easy for them to type this bc they wasn’t in a plant with haze so thick u couldn’t see down the aisles. Lungs burning, eyes burning! Headache lasting hours! This started yesterday around 6 pm and by 1 am jobs were being threatened and management was dictating how many ppl could be seen at medical (1 person is my understanding, not 1 per team or department just 1 person in medical alone with the shift having about a 1000 ppl). This whole statement is insulting coming from ppl who are in cushy offices with central air!!

Stacy, a worker at Ford Chicago Assembly wrote, “you all should be ASHAMED of yourselves for having us working in the conditions we are working in right now. The AIR QUALITY plus the excessive heat should throw out red flags at an ALARMING rate, however it seems all the the workers health issues are being ignored for the sake of ‘production.’”

Another autoworker Ed, posted, “And yet, here we are, working in what the USEPA has deemed as hazardous to all (maroon on their map) conditions. The company does air readings by the doorway where the wind blows through like a wind tunnel.... and the union reps let them take these false readings. The air is leaving a brown debris on all of the cars.... but we’re still told everything is fine. The union is weak... there is no solidarity.... leaders haven’t proven themselves to be trustworthy. This is not our father’s union. Very sad.”

“Not from a grunt like us in the 100+ degree plants trying to fight for our jobs and the right to breathe. Spend 8 hours or more in a plant right now and THEN come talk to us.”

Ron, a worker at Ford Michigan Assembly posted, “While the UAW International’s statement on air quality stresses the

importance of worker health, the reality on the shop floor demonstrates a catastrophic failure of enforcement. Press releases do not stop ambulances. During the recent hazardous air quality event, the company did not put health and safety first, nor did they shut down operations. Instead, they mandated ten-hour overtime shifts in a toxic environment.

“Because of these hazardous conditions, production was brought to a near standstill, yielding only a minute fraction of our average daily output. The cost of this operational failure was paid directly by the workers. Multiple employees suffered heat stroke and severe asthma attacks, requiring emergency medical transport and hospitalization via ambulance. This was a preventable medical crisis born of corporate negligence...

He continued, “Workers do not need written statements ‘urging’ employers to do the right thing. We need immediate, uncompromising enforcement of our contracts that shuts down the line when the environment becomes hazardous. Ultimately, the Company’s failure to protect its workers is blatant, but the lack of immediate, on-the-ground intervention from UAW leadership is equally condemning.”

A worker at the General Motors Flint Assembly plant posted, “OSHA suggested that I wear a N95 or higher face mask or respiratory device and take frequent breaks in a smoke free area, then they laughed and said if you can find one. They also stated that unless someone dies on site there’s no way for them to get involved so until then everyone is breathing toxins with unknown effects unless they find the appropriate breathing apparatuses.”

In another egregious example of the disregard for workers lives, a Canadian National Railway freight train was surrounded by wildfire flames near Armstrong in northwestern Ontario Wednesday. Video footage shows flames surrounding the locomotive. The crew barely escaped with their lives. The railroad sent the train into a zone where wildfires have been raging for five weeks.

The conditions facing other logistics workers are equally onerous. US postal service letter carriers and UPS drivers were forced to continue deliveries in trucks that for the most part lacked air conditioning in smoke-filled streets. An Ohio postal worker told the WSWs, “We haven’t heard from our union at all (NALC) regarding these hazardous conditions. Many people called off work today and all carriers are being ‘forced’ to work 10-12 hours.”

Another mail carrier posted on Facebook, “Called us back yesterday but leave us out today with double mail and papers with the air quality just as bad if not worse. Then punish us by making us use our own leave if we don’t want to sit in the office for 4 hours doing nothing - the post office will never make sense.” Another posted sarcastically, “Hope you guys and gals at NALC HQ enjoy your weekend and bonuses while us lowly letter carriers are doing extra pivots this weekend to make up for delayed service today.”

A worker at an Amazon warehouse in Euclid, Ohio posted, “People are getting f—ng hospitalized at the CLE3 Amazon facility on Babbit Road over this wildfire smoke and they are still not shutting down and forcing their workers to stay.

“They are doing less than the bare minimum to keep their

employees safe and it is beyond disgusting. What does calling OSHA about this get you? We don’t really have any set parameters for this kind of situation. F—ng worthless. THE AIR IS HAZARDOUS AND PEOPLE ARE BEING HOSPITALIZED BUT NOTHING IS BEING DONE TO PROTECT THE EMPLOYEES AND THE ONLY RESOURCE OUR GOVERNMENT HAS TO TRY AND DO SOMETHING ABOUT DANGEROUS WORKING CONDITIONS ISN’T DOING ANYTHING. If your girlfriend makes it home okay and can function have her file a complaint. Such a f—ng joke.”

In a statement issued Friday, Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker from McCungie, Pennsylvania who is running for UAW president denounced the refusal of the UAW apparatus to defend workers against the deadly smoke filling the factories.

From an air-conditioned office at Solidarity House, UAW President Shawn Fain posted a statement on Facebook conceding that extreme heat combined with hazardous air “creates an unsafe work environment.” He went further and named the remedy himself, calling for “shutting down work if hazardous air quality cannot be mitigated” by ventilation or masks. Then, while workers were being loaded into ambulances, he did nothing whatsoever. Instead, his statement advised members to “contact their local union representatives” and pledged to “rigorously enforce our contracts.” Not one directive went out to a local. Not one worker was authorized to stop. Not one plant closed.

Under the “act of God” language in the contracts this apparatus negotiated and signed, closing a plant for a natural disaster means reduced pay for us, and a worker who walks out to save his own lungs can be handed three days on the street without pay. That contract does not defend our right to leave a poisoned building; it punishes us for trying. Fain is not failing to enforce it. It is working exactly as designed.

This is what the bureaucracy is: several hundred officials in air conditioned rooms, living off the dues taken out of our checks, producing nothing and defending nothing, serving as the corporations’ labor relations department. They are parasites on the working class, and they have to be thrown out.



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