

Local county officials in California bow before billionaire's demand to reopen Tesla factory

By Jessica Goldstein
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Officials in Democratic Party-controlled Alameda County, California allowed electric carmaker Tesla to resume production at its Fremont plant in an announcement made Tuesday in a reversal of their earlier decision to enforce countywide stay-at-home orders meant to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which include a shutdown of nonessential industry.

The county will allow Tesla to begin "minimum business operations" at the Fremont plant as early as next Monday as long as it implements unspecified "additional safety recommendations," according to a company statement released Tuesday.

The 10,000 workers who work at the plant and their families are now at risk for contracting the deadly virus. Earlier in the week, workers received a company email threatening them with economic blackmail if they chose not to work for reasons of their own health and safety: "Choosing not to report to work may eliminate or reduce your eligibility for unemployment."

The decision was made after Tesla's CEO, multibillionaire Elon Musk, unleashed a slew of unhinged statements during a company earnings call in which he denounced the county's stay-at-home orders as "fascist."

Tesla subsequently filed a lawsuit against Alameda County Saturday, which alleged that there was "no rational basis" for the continued shutdown of the Fremont plant and that the county ignored state exceptions for "16 crucial infrastructure industries, including transportation."

"Tesla will now move its HQ and future programs to Texas/Nevada immediately," Musk tweeted Saturday before the lawsuit was filed. He added: "If we even

retain Fremont manufacturing activity at all, it will be dependen [sic] on how Tesla is treated in the future. Tesla is the last carmaker left in CA."

Musk—who has promoted a number of discredited conspiracy theories which downplay the threat posed by the new virus—was in fact already breaking the law by continuing to operate the Fremont plant in flagrant defiance of the county's orders, which he announced Monday on Twitter, with no consequences.

In a toothless statement, aimed at covering up their capitulation, county officials announced that they would "be working with the Fremont Police Department to verify Tesla is adhering to physical distancing and that agreed upon health and safety measures are in place for the safety of their workers as they prepare for full production."

Just before sanctioning the reopening, county officials sent a letter to Tesla ostensibly ordering it to cease production until they come to terms on a plan to reopen, with the greatest penalty faced by Musk potentially being a fine of up to \$1,000 a day or up to 90 days in jail. Musk is the 22nd richest man in the world with a private fortune estimated at \$40 billion.

Musk's statements garnered widespread publicity in the media and support from top members of the Trump administration and the president himself, who tweeted, "California should let Tesla & @elonmusk open the plant, NOW. It can be done Fast & Safely!"

The Democratic Party's climb-down before the billionaire executive was thoroughly predictable. Before the decision, California Governor Gavin Newsom said he had "great reverence" for Musk, with whom he had spoken "a number of days ago."

Fremont Mayor Lily Mei expressed concern over the

impact of shelter-in-place orders was having on companies like Tesla that “are so critical for our employment base.”

Tesla’s lawsuit against Alameda County was filed two days after Michigan’s Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer announced that manufacturing would be allowed to resume on May 11, in order to resume auto parts production for Detroit-based automakers, which plan to restart on May 18.

Tesla workers recognized Musk’s decision for what it was. One worker told the *Sacramento Bee*, “We’re extremely frustrated, angry, scared, that Elon is putting his cars before his workers. He’s putting those cars before his employees and their well-being.”

The decision to allow the Fremont plant to reopen is part of a broad push to restart nonessential businesses, which is already resulting in increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the 40 states that have begun to relax social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders. This includes California, which began loosening restrictions on May 4.

On Tuesday, Dr. Anthony Fauci of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee on Tuesday that the US will see “needless suffering and death” if states open up before measures are in place to effectively contain the spread of the virus.

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