

Workers angry, concerned as US auto plants reopen

By Jerry White
19 May 2020

Tens of thousands of autoworkers returned to factories across the United States on Monday as the Trump administration and corporations push for a rapid reopening of the economy despite the continued spread of the coronavirus.

The death toll in the US—the highest in the world—is 92,000 and will likely reach the grim milestone of 100,000 in a matter of days.

Workers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their anger and concern over the rush to reopen the plants and denounced the inadequate safety measures. “They screened us at the gates with thermal imaging machines and gave us two disposable facemasks—the kind you get on Amazon for \$15 for a box of 50—for our 10-hour shift,” one young worker at Fiat Chrysler’s Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) in Detroit said.

After a two-month shutdown, General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler restarted some 51 factories in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky and other states, including several where formal stay-at-home orders are still in place. At Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit, where at least four workers have died from COVID-19, workers filed into the plant earlier Monday morning under a banner that read, “Let’s restart.”

The industry publication *Automotive News* declared Monday, “The reopening of car plants will be a closely watched test of whether workers across a range of U.S. industries can return to factories in large numbers without a resurgence of infections.” President Trump plans to visit Ford’s Rawsonville, Michigan plant Thursday to tout his plan to “reopen America.”

Unsaid, however, is that the corporations and the government are experimenting with the lives of workers and their families. The restart of the industry is also a political test to see whether the corporations and the United Auto Workers can contain opposition when the inevitable resurgence of infections takes place.

“All over the plant there were banners about keeping safe, how clean it was and so on,” the JNAP worker said. “They

were very sensitive about trying to keep workers feeling comfortable. About 50-60 percent of the workers were wearing face shields, but there were some workers wearing surgical masks with their noses exposed and people talking to each other like it was business as usual. I’m worried some workers are going to let their guard down.”

“They’re intimidating TPTs [temporary part-time employees] and using economic pressure to make older workers show up. That’s the whole point of the check box in your weekly unemployment claim. It asks you if you were called back to work. If you say ‘yes’ and you don’t go to work, you’re not going to get a penny.”

In March, as the virus was running rampant throughout the plants, workers revolted against the UAW, launching a wave of wildcat strikes that forced the closure of the entire North American industry.

The UAW, whose former president was arraigned last week for a million-dollar kickback scheme, reiterated that the companies had the contractual right to decide when and how production resumes, union spokesman Brian Rothenberg told the *Detroit News*.

Todd Dunn, president of UAW Local 862 in Louisville, Kentucky, where Ford is bringing back 14,000 workers to two assembly plants, declared, “Ultimately we’re in this together. Because if we don’t build trucks, Ford Motor Company is gone.”

The companies hired thousands of TPTs—who can be fired if they do not report to work when called—because management anticipated widespread absenteeism Monday. However, most workers reportedly showed up for work.

This was the product of a massive campaign, with corporate executives and UAW officials claiming the plants were safe, state officials, including Michigan’s Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, sanctioning the reopening of manufacturing plants and threatening that workers who refused to return would face the loss of unemployment benefits and even their jobs.

“I’m assuming all the measures they put in place will be null and void in a couple of weeks,” a skilled trade worker

at JNAP added. “They tell us to stand six feet apart, but the car is not six foot wide. If you wear face shields and all that, I don’t see how with the place being so hot people can do it. The masks are flimsy, and the strings break off. I can only imagine what production is going through.”

“Time is of the essence,” a General Motors worker said in an email to the WSWS. “Returning to GM at this time only puts my family at the highest risk possible. To allow greed to kill us while the UAW gets tested, they talk family first until it’s time to keep us out of harm’s way.”

A worker at the GM Delta plant near Lansing, Michigan said, “The body shop reported today, and Wednesday the general assembly workers will start actual production. People aren’t ready to go back. They don’t feel it is safe enough. By not doing this correctly, this is going to spike out of control.

“When you have dealerships closed, why are you going to open the plants when you are not selling? What else is going to happen is we will have cars stockpiled all over the storage yards and everywhere else. At any time, GM could say we are not going to use the third shift now. So, a lot of people could be out of work.”

A worker at FCA’s Sterling Heights Assembly—where two workers sent in early to prep the plant tested positive for COVID-19 last week—said, “Only individuals with a prescription can get N95 mask. Only workers who show symptoms are provided with testing. Being on the line was very tense up to the first break not knowing how to eat in full PPE and behind plexiglass dividers. You feel somewhat safe till someone walks behind you and your shield coughing or laughing and talking with no mask on.

“The morning started with the plant manager doing a virtual town hall meeting. We were given a packet showing all the cleaning done over the furlough period. Then we found out we have about 20,000 orders for trucks, and we’ll be working 10-hour shifts until further notice.”

Another Jefferson worker pointed out that 300 Jeeps were built Monday instead of the normal 640 vehicles. “When they ramp up the line speed, they’re going to drop these precautions. They should be testing everybody before going in. But they don’t want to because it would put off the restart, and the UAW, whose top leaders got tested, are going along with this.”

The auto executives have rejected regular testing for workers despite the fact that daily temperature taking will not detect infected workers who are asymptomatic. Asked Monday on National Public Radio why Ford didn’t provide daily testing to every worker, CEO Jim Hackett declared, “It’s just not practical here at the beginning, particularly with us—we will be over 200,000 people.”

Last week, Hackett echoed President Trump’s reactionary

claim that the loss of corporate profits from keeping corporations closed was worse than the deaths caused by COVID-19. “There are two truths here and they’re in competition,” Hackett told Yahoo Finance. “One is we’ve got to have safe work environments, and the other is if we keep the economy turned off, we’re going to have a fate worse than some of the things that the virus is causing.” He reiterated on NPR, saying, “90,000 deaths is a pure tragedy, and 36 million people out of employment is tragic. You can’t solve the paradox by saying one is more important than the other.”

But Hackett is not concerned about the hardships facing jobless workers. Ford has laid off more than 30,000 workers over the last few years while enriching shareholders and executives like himself with stock buybacks and dividend payments. Hackett and the other auto bosses are solely concerned about the loss of profits as the debts of the Detroit automakers pile up.

Last week, GM floated bonds to raise \$4 billion. FCA is seeking a corporate bailout from the Italian government. Ford, whose stocks have been punished over the last two years, could face bankruptcy or a corporate takeover. This is behind the reckless rush to restart production and pump out profits from workers to pay off bondholders and other Wall Street investors.

With workers being forced back into the plants, they must have the means to protect themselves. The Socialist Equality Party and WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* urge workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, to oversee health and safety in the plants.

These committees, working in conjunction with trusted medical professionals, must insist on shorter work hours and regular downtime to provide for the universal testing and monitoring of workers’ health. Workers must be provided with multiple sets of N95 masks and other protective gear, and have access to immediate medical treatment, with no loss of pay.

The guiding principle of these committees must be that the needs of workers for a safe working environment must come before the profit interests of the giant corporations.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>