

“They are willing to trade lives for auto parts”

As full operations resume, North American auto companies keep silent on spreading COVID-19 cases

By Shannon Jones
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Thousands more autoworkers across North America are being called back to work this week despite a rising number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in factories.

On Monday, General Motors resumed three shift operations at its Wentzville, Missouri; Fort Wayne, Indiana; and Flint, Michigan, assembly plants and added second shifts in Ingersoll, Ontario, and Spring Hill, Tennessee. Several other GM plants are reopening with one shift.

Fiat Chrysler is expanding production to three shifts this week at a number of plants including at Sterling Heights, Michigan, and at Jefferson North in Detroit. It is also reopening its Belvidere, Illinois, factory.

Ford is restarting its Dearborn Assembly plant Monday after it had to temporarily close Thursday evening when it ran out of seats for the F-150 truck. The Ford Kansas City plant was also forced to close last week after a worker tested positive and other undisclosed reasons, but was set to restart Monday.

Nearly every major auto company operating in North America has now reported COVID-19 cases among their workforce. Workers on the A Crew at the Ford Dearborn Truck plant forced a temporary halt to production May 20 after it was discovered that a worker on their shift had tested positive for COVID-19. There were also brief production stoppages at Ford Chicago Assembly.

Fiat Chrysler and General Motors have acknowledged that there have been confirmed COVID-19 cases at their factories, but they have not halted production even for cleaning. Neither company has reported how many workers were taken ill or at what factories.

The United Auto Workers said that Ford and GM had at least six cases and that Fiat Chrysler had five. Meanwhile, both Toyota and Honda said they had unspecified numbers of COVID-19 cases at their plants and that they had carried out brief pauses in production for cleaning. At latest count at

least 25 workers employed by the Detroit Three have died from the disease, along with one Hyundai worker in Montgomery, Mississippi. An undisclosed number of auto parts workers have also died.

Workers contacted by the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* denounced the auto companies and the UAW for enforcing an early return to work under conditions where the COVID-19 pandemic is still spreading.

“A lot of workers feel Chrysler is putting our lives in danger,” a worker at Sterling Heights Assembly told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “We don’t know if our co-worker may have the virus,” he continued. “The six feet rule is impossible in an assembly plant. It takes two people to do certain jobs.”

At Jefferson North at least four workers became ill while working on the assembly line Thursday evening. Production was not halted, and the UAW and management have refused to supply workers with any explanation of what happened or if the affected workers were tested for COVID-19. Temporary Part Time (TPT) workers are being forced to work 60-hour work weeks to make up for absenteeism. Also, protocols to shut the line 15 minutes before the end of the shift for cleaning are largely being ignored, and the extra time added to breaks, supposedly to clean, is being used by exhausted workers to rest and try to catch their breaths because of difficulties of working in a hot area with a mask.

The information blackout by the UAW and auto company management makes it ever more imperative for workers to organize independently to protect their health and safety through the building of rank-and-file workplace and factory safety committees. These committees should be democratically controlled by workers and monitor all conditions in the plants including full testing, social distancing, expanded break times and slower line speeds. In opposition to the increase in production and speed up, which

will inevitably lead to the subordination of safety to profit, rank-and-file safety committees must assert their control over production and safety.

A worker at the FCA Windsor Assembly plant in Ontario, Canada, said, workers were being “starved back to work.”

“I believe this is the beginning of the end for freedom in every aspect of the word ‘freedom.’ I am not shocked whatsoever, just very disappointed. My heart goes out to every single person working on the assembly line having to deal with less than standard safety measures. We have gone backwards a millennium. Everything our grandfathers fought for is all but lost.”

A major factor driving the premature reopening of auto plants is financial pressures from banks and investors. Auto sales in April were down 46 percent from one year ago. Some forecasts see a year-over-year decline of 30 percent. Cox Automotive predicted that sales of pickup trucks would be down 18 percent in May.

Auto companies are heavily leveraged and must service an increasing debt load. On April 17, Ford sold \$8 billion in high yield “junk” bonds, that is, bonds below what Wall Street considers investment grade. GM also recently sold \$4 billion in high yield bonds in an attempt to shore up its increasingly shaky financial position. They are thus seeking to squeeze every ounce of profit and production possible off the backs of workers to pay off these debts.

A worker at the FCA transmission plant outside Kokomo, Indiana, denounced the demand by management that workers pay back Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB) they received during the shutdown. “Taking away our SUB pay is an injustice because FCA is asking for the money back before they even gave it to us. Some had it taken in a lump sum, and others are having it taken back \$100 per check. I had to pay back \$480.00. We need that money because we are struggling to pay our bills since we went back to eight-hour shifts. When it came to applying for unemployment many people did not know what to do because they had never done it before. The UAW [United Auto Workers] was not any help because the union website was unclear on what we needed to do to get unemployment.

“I don’t want to give this to my family members. There was an engineer who had died of COVID-19 and another worker who was diagnosed with it. What was this all for? Their numbers. They thought nothing through. They’re going to have to shut it down all over again.”

A worker at the GM foundry in Bedford, Indiana, wrote to the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “They have stated and written the importance of distancing and minimizing contact. However, they have mandated and forced employees to work excessive hours including weekends. They have exhausted and not replenished the cleaning supplies for the

work areas. Much of the staff and leadership are either not present or working from home. Most of the affected employees are aged 50 plus.”

He continued, “My point is, forcing extra contact by excessive overtime, exposing at risk employees to toxins, not having replenished cleaning supplies, managers not being exposed to extra hours or even being present. General Motor’s mandates are self-serving. They are willing to trade lives for auto parts.”

The FCA transmission plant worker described the lack of serious safety precautions and unhealthy conditions in the plant since it reopened for production in mid-May. “Every time we start and end a shift we wait in line, pre-screen, then get the infrared temperature check. And in the line, you can’t social distance. Then we need to go through three doors just to get inside of the plant. First of all, there is not enough hand sanitizer or gloves in the plant. There is one hand sanitizer set up at the beginning of the line, and one sink, and it’s hard to find soap. We have disinfectant cleaner, but not enough paper towels, so I had to buy some of my own—but we can’t be expected to keep doing that.

“There is no way to do social distancing at all. One shift goes in as another comes out, so there are always thousands of people in the plant. It is causing the parking lots to be overcrowded which is dangerous because since we’ve opened there have been multiple times people have nearly gotten into accidents. We now get one ten-minute break each hour with only fifteen minutes for lunch, and just walking to the bathroom to wash your hands takes five minutes.

“Managers are handing out cheap masks with their bare hands. The masks rip easily, and the elastic hurts our ears, so we need to buy or make the ear loops that attach them to your glasses or hat. It’s hard to breathe with them on. We’ve been getting lightheaded and have phlegm building up in the back of our throats.”

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