

“They believe their profits are profits are more relevant than human life”

Mexican autoworkers say General Motors is covering up COVID-19 outbreak at Silao plant

By Andrea Lobo
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General Motors workers at the Silao Complex in Guanajuato, Mexico are reporting a growing number of confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases, which are being covered up by the company to avoid disrupting production of the profitable Silverado and Sierra pickup trucks at the plant.

Workers have reported similar responses by General Motors to outbreaks across the United States, including in Kansas City, Wentzville, Missouri and Arlington, Texas.

While receiving reports from their co-workers and their families about two confirmed cases and at least three suspected ones, workers explained to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “the fact is we don’t know how many people have had contact with them, putting at risk thousands of us who work in the plant.”

Workers learned as early as June 9 and June 11, respectively, that a worker in the general assembly area and another worker in the paint and maintenance area had tested positive to COVID-19. In a maneuver to conceal this information from the public, General Motors reportedly sent both workers to the private Ángeles Hospital, 30 miles away in León. Injured and sick workers are usually treated at the public Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), which generally makes public confirmed cases.

Then, on June 15, workers in contact with the *Autoworker Newsletter* learned of a suspected infection of a worker at the 6-velocity transmissions area, after a family member tested positive. The following day, workers reported that two workers in the paint area were sent back home, “because they were in really bad

condition, with cough and the flu, all the symptoms of COVID-19.”

The worker in the paint area who reported these suspected cases said, “There is going to be a health inspection [by the Labor Ministry] but as always they’ll try to cover it up. It depends on the people to expose the truth: that there is no safe distancing. They should go to the bathrooms which are really nasty, get on the trucks in both directions for them to see how screwed up and cramped everyone is. The company can window-dress everything—‘for money even the dog dances.’”

Another worker in the repair area explained, “It’s simply not possible to keep social distancing because there are too many of us. I think it’s hard to follow these rules since more than 200 people go to the cafeteria in the 30 minutes to eat. And, at repairs, we all touch the same material.”

Israel Cervantes, a GM Silao worker who was victimized last year for opposing the company controlled union and supporting the GM national strike in the United States, told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “What comes first is the health of the workers for the welfare of their family, but the company takes advantage of the precarious wages [and] that most workers have debt. That is the issue that forces them to work, and, moreover, the authorities do nothing to defend workers.

“The government and businesspeople believe that profits and wealth are more relevant than human life. They assure us that factories and other workplaces must remain open for the benefit of the poor working class but it’s precisely our lives that are being sacrificed in their

working areas.”

He concluded, “It’s of utmost importance that we workers organize and begin demanding better working and human conditions. At the same time, we must unite all workers from all social branches—from teachers to app workers like Uber and others—to create national and international bonds with workers and even a political party.”

General Motors had closed its Mexican operations on March 23 fearing that a wave of wildcat strikes at auto-plants in Europe and the United States would spread to Mexico. However, the corporation and its bribed trade unions agreed to pay only 55 percent of wages during the shutdown, exerting immense pressure on workers. While cynically “ordering” the payment of full wages, the state of emergency decreed by the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador allowed for such deals to be rubberstamped by the corrupt union bureaucracy.

On May 18, the López Obrador government yielded to pressures by the White House and transnational corporations and designated transportation-related equipment as essential. General Motors, the largest automaker in Mexico, was the first to announce a partial restart in Mexico. *Automotive News* reported that the company was “eager to replenish its pickup inventory,” after the 40-day US strike last year and the COVID-19 shutdown.

On May 21, General Motors re-opened its production of transmissions and engines at two of its four plants in Mexico—Ramos Arizpe in Coahuila state and Silao. Over the next days, GM gradually re-opened its other plants and assembly areas depending on the arrival of supplies from abroad.

Announcing the reopening, GM president for Mexico, Francisco Garza, said “The wellbeing and safety of our collaborators has been and will be our main priority,” and vowed that an “Internal Verification and Monitoring Committee” would enforce measures to prevent infections at the plants.

However, workers are exposing that the main priority of General Motors is to rapidly accelerate production regardless of the toll on the health of workers and their families, while the Mexican government functions as an entirely subservient partner in this criminal policy.

The coverup of COVID-19 cases by GM and hundreds of manufacturing companies across Mexico is not only sanctioned by the government, it is an extension of the deliberate underreporting of cases by authorities who are anxious to justify the re-opening of the economy.

Moreover, López Obrador has refused to provide any aid to workers fired or suspended from their jobs, employing the threat of hunger and deprivation as a whip to force workers to return to infected workplaces.

The Health Ministry continues to report an accelerated spread of the pandemic to more than 155,000 cases and 18,000 deaths. *El País* found recently that nearly 80 percent of those dying from COVID-19 in Mexico are not receiving intensive care unit treatment. Such a dire reality has not stopped López Obrador from claiming this week that “the pandemic has been dominated,” “not a single person has been left without care,” and “we are concerned with helping those at the bottom.”

Workers can only rely on themselves for monitoring infections and opposing unsafe conditions. At General Motors and other workplaces, such efforts need to be organized by electing rank-and-file safety committees, independent of all pro-capitalist and nationalist institutions, including the trade unions, their pseudo-left backers, the López Obrador administration and the rest of the political establishment.

These truly independent organizations would establish contact, through social media and other means, with private and public hospital workers and epidemiological experts to overcome the official web of lies and complacency regarding the deadly pandemic. These committees would also organize the necessary actions, in coordination with their brothers and sisters in the United States and internationally, to enforce safe conditions at the plants and the closing of infected and nonessential plants with full pay.

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