

“You risk your life when you go back to work”

Ford workers express health concerns as COVID-19 pandemic spreads

By Tim Rivers and George Kirby
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The *World Socialist Web Site* reported on Saturday that Ford Motor Company has called back its third shifts at assembly plants in Chicago; Dearborn, Michigan; and Louisville Assembly and Kentucky Truck in Louisville. The return to full production comes two weeks ahead of schedule with normal shift patterns at all of its US assembly plants starting Monday, ahead of the original target date of July 6. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to several workers from the Dearborn Truck Plant about the risk of returning in the midst of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

“A lot of people were skeptical about the reopening,” said a worker we shall call Matt. “There was a video with Burkie Morris, the United Auto Workers [UAW] plant chairman. He tried to ease the concerns of those who were questioning safety. We would be given hand sanitizer and breathable masks. They started putting X’s on tables to separate workers, provided temperature checks and a survey at the gate. But as people started getting in there, cases of COVID increased.”

In the two weeks following the company’s “staged” reopening, which began in mid-May, at least one worker tested positive for the coronavirus at each of the restarted plants. At first the company responded with partial, brief shutdowns for disinfecting. But now they are not stopping production for any reason.

“Now if there is a case, they won’t stop,” he said. “There is no protocol or procedure. If they have the manpower, the line will keep running. That is alarming to many people. We don’t know who to trust.”

Many seemed to think the company and the union are covering up the spread of the virus in the factory. “With the reopening, the company wanted to look like they were being safe,” he said, “but really they were only waiting until they could force us back to work.”

Dearborn Truck began production in 2004 as the company’s most technologically advanced factory to build

F-150 pickups. Because COVID-19 remains viable on a metal or plastic part for up to nine hours, auto production is prone to spread the infection. Standing in close proximity on 4.2 miles of conveyor systems, 4,400 workers on three shifts handle more than 3,000 parts per truck to build 1,200 trucks every day. That’s 3.5 million pieces moving through the facility at any given time, any one of which is capable of spreading the contagion.

“At first I was feeling confident about the company’s ‘safety measures,’” added Jasmine, a co-worker on B Crew, who works afternoons during the week. “I watched the shop chairman’s video saying they would supply us with PPE. Then a few weeks ago, A Crew stopped working when a worker tested positive.”

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines require that when a worker tests positive, an entire plant must shut down for a full 24 hours before beginning the process of sanitizing. The coronavirus particles that are airborne must first settle out of the air before they can be disposed of. Ford did not do that.

“They never shut the plant down,” she said. “They just sent A Crew home for a three-hour cleaning, and we came right back a few hours later. I told my committeeman we should not even be running if the virus is not under control. Now there are positive cases on every shift. That’s the disgusting part of it.”

Many are asking, “Why the rush?”

In March, as sales dropped 15 percent for the first quarter, measured against last year’s numbers, rating agencies cut Ford’s credit rating from investment grade to junk bond status. The Federal Reserve responded with the largest government purchase of junk-rated bonds on record, permitting the company to regain an investment-grade rating so that it could borrow another \$8 billion from bond sales. Outstanding debt rose to roughly \$157 billion.

Bondholders and corporate investors are demanding blood money—full payment of interest due on the company’s debt.

The profits to pay that bill must be extracted from the workers, no matter what the cost in sickness and death. That is the motive behind this homicidal policy, which can only lead to the further spread of COVID.

“Before the full reopening, there were talks with the UAW,” Matt continued. “They made it seem that things were going to be tip top shape. They just reopened without talking to the workers. It is like a dictatorship. We don’t agree with the rush back to work. It’s the same as when we were running before COVID. We are doubled up on the job with no separation. The UAW sold us out again.”

Last Friday the UAW, working together with Ford and the other automakers, called on factory workers to “stand down” for eight minutes and forty-six seconds at 8:46 a.m. to “reflect” on the police murder of George Floyd, the African American worker suffocated to death by a Minneapolis cop on May 25.

Floyd’s death touched a nerve; and many workers were outraged and infuriated regardless of their skin color, nationality or ethnic background. Multiple police murders occur every day in the US and throughout the world. And workers who are unemployed or facing sickness and death for themselves or a family member can identify with George Floyd.

“Justice for George Floyd and others murdered by police is number one,” Matt said. “Small changes, reforms or putting people of color in office or on the police force will not stop people being brutalized by them. Working people are seen as enemies to the police.” He went on to explain some of the broader political issues that this experience raises.

“The profit system and the prison system are things that cannot be addressed by the ‘moving forward’ slogans of the political establishment. We need to understand the function of these systems. The police are called to suppress strikes. They are protecting capital from a revolt by the workers.”

But when it comes to an initiative by UAW President Rory Gamble, who is only the most recent executive of that organization to face a federal corruption probe, workers are justifiably suspicious. Indeed, Gamble went out of his way to defend the police in a statement regarding the Floyd murder. He made clear he did not intend “to vilify our brave men and women in blue. We represent many police officers and they are truly untold heroes. ...”

“Gamble is out of touch,” remarked Jason, another co-worker from Ford Rouge. “His statement is not aligned with workers’ struggles in this country. It shows that he is in a different class than everyone else. The fact is that he’s saying that the police are ‘great people’ while protesters are being attacked by them with tear gas and batons. The police function is to squash a movement by the people to move

things forward. Instead, the UAW wants more police and to get everyone back to work.”

“You need an understanding of who is being targeted,” Matt added. “There is racism, but the police are in poor, working class communities as a form of repression to stop any movement of people coming together. Detroit has a black police chief, but the job is still the same. They work for the state.

“In order to destroy racism, we need to unite as a class for our interests. Rory Gamble and the UAW don’t have the same struggles as workers. They are tied to management financially.”

In speaking about the union, Matt mentioned a grievance, which had been filed at the beginning of the COVID crisis by Gary Walkowicz of the Spark tendency, which is a pseudo-left, loyal opposition within the UAW. “He called for more break times, shutting the plant down if any worker gets sick and for everyone to get tested. Some people were happy about that,” he explained. “I told them not to hold their breath. After the filing, there was no further news about the grievance. It was a ploy to make people think the union is doing something.

“Workers need rank-and-file committees to control conditions within the plant. No one else will do it. The company and the union are only thinking about profits. If safety gets in the way, we won’t be protected. There’s plenty of money for new masks. They’re putting you under pressure to go in the plant. You risk your life for corporate profit.”

Another worker from final assembly had a similar sentiment. “I did not receive a call back for Monday,” he said. “But from what I heard, there are infections every day. You risk your life when you go back to work.”

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