Workers stop production at Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North auto plant in Detroit over COVID-19

By Shannon Jones
26 June 2020

Day shift workers at the Fiat Chrysler Jefferson Assembly Plant in Detroit were sent home early Thursday afternoon over health concerns after workers staged a protest amid reports that three workers were diagnosed with cases of COVID-19 at the plant. As of this writing, workers on the second shift, known as the “B Crew,” have refused to resume production, although supervisors and union officials have used a combination of threats and false claims to convince workers to restart the assembly line.

The action comes as COVID-19 cases are surging in wide areas of the US after the ending of lockdown measures and the reopening of factories, restaurants and other workplaces, including the restart of auto production. On Monday, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) and Ford resumed full operations at factories across North America.

A worker at Jefferson told the World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter, “There were three confirmed cases on ‘A Crew’ and they were forced to shut the line down 3 1/2 hours before the end of the shift, around 12 noon. It wasn't management or the union, it was the workers who shut the line.

“People are super-pissed. They haven't started production on ‘B Crew’ yet. They are ready to walkout. The union officials are nowhere to be found. People are saying, ‘Why are we here when people got sick?’ We heard it was one worker in engine and two workers in trim who tested positive.”

A worker writing on the United Auto Workers Local 7 Facebook page reported, “Someone got sick and threw up on parts that have been distributed around the plant since 8am. Where is our union to handle these situations? People are being threatened for refusing to work with those parts…”

Another worker posted, “Someone had COVID on A crew and they stopped the line at 12 and refused to work. All I know is when we got here, engine line refused to work and we only did a few cars, then we stopped. Now the whole plant is down. There were 3 cases of COVID in here today.”

An evening shift worker wrote, “The Axle loop has refused to work because of the 3 positive COVID-19 on A crew today. I’ve seen everyone in a huddle for hours now. The plant manager, the entire management team seems to be there now. Our UAW reps... everyone who is anyone is over there trying to negotiate with the peeps from the Axle group. But they are standing firm and STILL refusing to work.”

One worker posted his support on Facebook: “Hope y’all shut down; we came back too early anyway they knew this could happen Greed.”

A female worker told the Autoworker Newsletter, "Line still not working at JNAP. Only 10 cars or 2 minutes on production on 'B' Crew. Someone got sick on the line. The workers on engine and axle are refusing to work. The plant manager and the UAW officials are trying to get them to restart production, but they won't. But company officials will not shut down the plant. It’s just too much potential money for them. If they could get 45 minutes of production out of us between 2:15 and 3:00 am, they would do it.”

In late May there had been reports of an unexplained illness at the Jefferson plant that caused several workers to collapse. There was no interruption of production or even measures taken to ensure the disinfection of the plant.

This is not the first report of job actions over
COVID-19 concerns since the auto plants reopened on May 18. Last month, workers at the Ford Dearborn Truck plant briefly stopped production after the discovery of coronavirus cases. Some workers at the General Motors plant in Wentzville, Missouri also staged a walkout after workers tested positive for COVID-19.

In mid-March, unofficial job actions by workers at Windsor Assembly, Sterling Heights Assembly, Dundee Engine and Toledo North forced FCA and then all automakers to suspend production. Production was restarted last month in concert with a propaganda campaign by the corporations, the media and the UAW that new safety protocols would protect workers from the deadly disease.

The wildcat actions were taken by workers in defiance of the UAW, which has worked as a police force for management throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

While FCA has boasted of resuming full operations and vowing not to carry out another shutdown of operations, the auto companies are facing high levels of absenteeism due to the resistance of workers to exposing themselves and their families to COVID-19. Manpower shortages continue despite the hiring of more temporary part-time workers, extended shifts and Sunday overtime. A worker at Sterling Heights Assembly reported that he had heard of one worker who put in 120 hours in one week.

“Workers are exhausted,” he said. “They are more susceptible to illness. Some are getting off at 3am and then going back at noon.”

Even as it subjects workers to the danger of COVID-19, FCA is the beneficiary of a $6.9 billion bailout from the government of Italy and massive tax cuts from city officials in Detroit.

No one is going to defend the lives and health of workers but workers themselves. That is why workers must elect rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the bribed UAW, to assert control over health and safety conditions, including work hours and line speeds. Where conditions are unsafe, there must be a stoppage of work. At the same time, workers must demand full protective gear, regular testing, universal health care and guaranteed income and the distribution of information. FCA workers should unite with workers throughout the US and internationally in a unified struggle against capitalism, a system that sacrifices human life for corporate profit.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
http://www.wsws.org

© World Socialist Web Site