

# Work stoppages against COVID-19 spread to FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant

By Jerry White  
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*The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter will assist autoworkers and other workers in establishing safety committees. Email the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter at [autoworkers@wsws.org](mailto:autoworkers@wsws.org).*

Fiat Chrysler workers at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), just north of Detroit, halted production Saturday evening after they learned that a materials handler worker had tested positive for COVID-19. The job action at SHAP followed a two-day work stoppage at Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) in Detroit after at least one worker got sick and was sent home.

“General assembly, body, everything is down,” a SHAP worker who spoke to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* reported Saturday evening. “Employees are standing on blue social distance lines away from jobs. Fiat Chrysler has threatened to shut off employees’ badges [essentially disciplining or terminating them]. No union in sight yet.”

Another SHAP worker reported, “We heard that a worker in materials handling, who delivers parts to workers on the assembly, was infected with COVID. This person saw the doctor who contacted SHAP, I don’t know if it was Human Relations or the union, and told them, ‘You have someone working there who was COVID positive.’ We have no idea how long this person was working and spreading the disease.

“After they heard this, the material handlers stopped working, and we ran out of parts, stopping the line. After that, management sent the whole material team home and tried to get temps to replace them without even sanitizing anything. Everyone just stopped working and went to the blue line. The supervisors are giving people direct orders to work, but the workers are ignoring them. The union is on the floor trying to get people back to work.”

At least five workers employed at SHAP have died from COVID-19, including two electricians from the paint shop who workers report died last month, along with two other workers at the nearby Sterling Heights Stamping plant. Altogether, dozens of autoworkers at FCA, Ford, GM, Hyundai and other automakers have died during the pandemic.

Workers at FCA Jefferson North Assembly, which employs nearly 5,000 workers on three shifts, have set up the Jefferson North Rank-and-File Safety Committee to protect themselves. In a statement released Friday, the committee wrote that JNAP workers were “taking a stand to defend our lives and the lives of our families.”

The JNAP workers stopped production, the committee said, because workers do not feel safe and neither management nor the UAW was “giving us real information about the spread of the coronavirus in our plants.” Denouncing the return to work last month as “totally premature,” the committee said, “Record numbers of deaths every day are inevitably going to come unless something is done.” They are calling on workers throughout FCA, the auto industry and in other factories and workplaces to take similar action.

SHAP workers have now formed the Sterling Heights Rank-and-File Safety Committee. In their statement, the committee said they will fight for the same demands as the rank-and-file committee at JNAP.

These include:

- Workers must be immediately notified of any cases of COVID-19 and what areas were affected. This information cannot be kept secret from workers.
- When there’s a case confirmed, the factory should be closed for 24 hours for deep cleaning, not just the

affected area, but the whole plant. Preventative maintenance is needed to ensure a safe and comfortable working environment.

- Social distancing must be implemented when entering and leaving the plant and during bathroom, lunch and other break times.

- The line must be stopped for 10 minutes every hour to enable workers to take off their masks, rest and cool off.

- Workers must have regular, universal testing. Temperature checks and self-reporting symptoms are not enough.

- If conditions are not safe, workers have the right to refuse to work without threat of retaliation by management and the union.

“The companies will stop at nothing to keep production going and making profits no matter what the cost in human life,” the Sterling Heights Rank-and-File Safety Committee stated. “The UAW is bribed and in bed with the company. They will not protect us. It is time workers take our safety into our own hands.

“We support the Jefferson North Rank-and-File Safety Committee and all of their demands. By forming committees, workers will have power over what is happening instead of being put in a position where they feel helpless. Workers should be able to say, ‘I don’t agree with this. I don’t feel safe. I will not put myself in a position where my health is on the line, where I could potentially get my children or someone else sick.’

“If management will not implement these basic demands, then we will not work until there are safe conditions. It is time that workers have our own committees and our own chain of command. We will not let them use us as guinea pigs to make profit.”

SHAP workers have reported that management has made work this Sunday mandatory because large numbers of workers, concerned about the disease,

called off of work. The company is forcing temporary part-time workers to pull 16- and 20-hour shifts, leaving them exhausted and more susceptible to being infected with COVID-19.

Opposition is also growing at the Toledo North Assembly in Ohio and at other plants. One Toledo Jeep worker told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, “There is no six feet rule here. There are what you can call shower curtains between stations that will easily be contaminated. We have 10-hour days, six days a week, with Sundays sometimes. At my age, I can’t work 14 days straight.”

Referring to the wildcat strikes at Toledo Jeep, JNAP, SHAP and other plants in mid-March, he said, “I was there when workers stormed the union office. Trim stopped production, and the rest of the line workers joined. If it wasn’t for workers, the plants and workplaces would still be running. As far as the UAW and management are concerned, the lives of workers don’t matter because they can get another person to take your place.”

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