

“Chrysler was telling everybody that it was safe to come back to work, and it’s not.”

Autoworkers at FCA Trenton Engine call for rank-and-file safety committees to fight COVID-19

By Tim Rivers
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Join the fight to defend workers’ health and safety! For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your factory, send an email to the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org to learn more.

To get in touch with the rank-and-file safety committee at FCA Jefferson North Assembly Plant, email jnapsafety@gmail.com.

Workers at Fiat Chrysler’s Trenton Engine plant, located 30 miles south of Detroit, expressed their support for the formation of a rank-and-file safety committee at the company’s Jefferson North (JNAP) and Sterling Heights (SHAP) assembly plants, and their desire to form one at their own workplace. These committees were formed by workers in the midst of work stoppages last week in response to management and union inaction to the spread of the virus in the plants.

Conditions at Trenton Engine are no different. When a worker in the south plant at Trenton Engine tested positive for COVID-19 a week ago Monday, the company refused to shut down the plant for cleaning. Instead, management herded about two dozen co-workers from the affected area into a break room for “isolation” and organized a hasty “wipe down” of the line. “Instead of sending us home,” one worker said, “they quarantined four teams inside the plant temporarily.”

When the companies and the entire political establishment were gearing up to force workers back into the plants in May, they promised in the corporate

press that they were taking full precautions and the virus was under control. A co-worker described the mood that was fostered at the time.

“They wanted you to feel safe to come to work,” she said. “They said they were cleaning and wiping down every hour and stopping the line to clean. I thought I should be good to go back to work.” But when they returned to the factory, the opposite was the case. “It’s like it was a false advertisement,” she concluded. “You are not doing any of this at all!”

The rank-and-file safety committees at SHAP and JNAP are demanding the closure of the factory for at least 24 hours when a case is confirmed for cleaning, real social distancing when entering and exiting the plants, regular breaks in production to allow workers to take off their masks and cool off and regular testing for all workers. The committees also denounced the threats by FCA management against work stoppages, insisting that workers have the right to refuse work under unsafe conditions.

“I support those demands one hundred percent. Yes!” one Trenton Engine worker said. In fact, “We should be shutting down for 72 hours, since the virus stays on surfaces that long.”

Anger in the plant is boiling over as summer heat combines with anxiety over the spiking number of coronavirus cases and a spreading conviction that both management and the United Auto Workers union are concealing information about infections. “On days like this, it gets up to 110 degrees,” another worker said.

“People pass out from the masks in this heat. We need breaks.”

On Monday, FCA circulated a letter from a top executive threatening anyone who stops production with disciplinary action, demanding that workers sign a list acknowledging the letter. “What are they going to do,” a worker asked, “fire all of us?”

“This is ridiculous how the numbers are growing,” he continued. “This is worldwide, everywhere. I believe that we should form a rank-and-file committee at Trenton Engine to join in with JNAP and SHAP.

“I will make sure that I am part of it. We need that at all plants and factories worldwide. We need to stick together because, as we can see, the [United Auto Workers union] isn’t with us. They are on management’s side and the company’s side. So we need to stick together on our own.”

Instead of systematic testing, the company and the union are placing the burden of diagnosis on each individual worker, in the form of a survey about coronavirus symptoms. The same letter sought to scapegoat workers who failed to self-report symptoms, threatening them with termination.

Workers are already under immense financial pressures not to miss work. “I wonder how many people are lying on the questionnaire stating that they are fine and that they haven’t been next to somebody with COVID,” one worker said.

She suggested that the committees formulate a demand to fight this vicious Catch-22. “We need to add something to our demands in the rank-and-file committee so that if you have to quarantine off you receive full pay during that time ... The companies are saying, ‘If you don’t come to work, we are going to cut off your unemployment.’ How can you force people that are sick to go to work in a factory? That is so cruel! That is wrong! That is why the virus is spreading so rapidly.”

A “floater” who works on several different lines passing from station to station showed symptoms last week and, at the time of this writing, is still waiting for her test results. “There are quite a few spooked people,” a co-worker reported. “Many are higher up in age and know they have high risk.”

Workers in her vicinity in the plant have not been tested or furloughed. “The virus isn’t being taken seriously,” he continued, “as though it’s just a passing

fad to them. They want you to work harder and build more engines. They don’t care about your safety.

“The union steward is on the side of the company. I feel like I’m not safe, not protected. I’m just in there on my own trying to fight and survive and hold onto my job. In this new contract, Chrysler can fire you without a reason.”

To add insult to injury, Fiat Chrysler is substituting a powerful industrial cleaning compound for hand sanitizer and passing it out in the factories for constant use. There have been reports of a caustic reaction and severe skin irritation. One image which workers have circulated on Facebook shows the warning label on a gallon jug which states: “If on skin (or hair): Remove/Take off immediately all contaminated clothing. Rinse skin with water/shower.”

The Material Safety Data Sheet for the product lists potential health effects including “Causes eye irritation,” and “dryness or skin irritation,” as well as, “Breathing mist may cause irritation to nasal and respiratory system. May cause dizziness or drowsiness.” Finally, it “may be fatal if swallowed and enters airways.”

A worker with 13 years at the plant summed up the mood of many of those we interviewed. “I have seen someone get sick and get taken to the ambulance on a stretcher,” he said. “Not even two minutes later, boom! They have another one right there waiting to replace that person. They want the line to keep moving. They don’t care if you die in that ambulance truck, or not.

“We need to spread this word. We need a network of rank-and-file committees.”

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<http://www.wsws.org>