

“We are at our breaking point”

FCA Toledo Jeep workers support call for rank-and-file safety committees

By Marcus Day
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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.

Support for rank-and-file safety committees continues to grow among autoworkers, following the initiation of committees last week by workers at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North (JNAP) and Sterling Heights (SHAP) assembly plants.

Autoworkers around the US have widely shared reports from the *World Socialist Web Site* about the courageous stand taken at the two Detroit-area plants, where workers stopped work to protest unsafe conditions and demand information about the spread of COVID-19 in their plants.

Anger is reaching a boiling point as workers continue to fall ill and management and the United Auto Workers union refuse to release information about the extent of COVID-19 cases. “It is ridiculous,” Johnny, a worker at Fiat Chrysler's Toledo North Assembly Plant, said. “Threats and intimidation. People popping up positive left and right. I've been hearing we've had about 11 positive this week alone. All different parts of the plants. Plus, there are several other potential cases.”

Another worker at the FCA Toledo plant said that workers needed a rank-and-file safety committee at their factory, adding that they had read and shared the statement by the committee at Jefferson North. “Management and the union are two peas in a pod down in Toledo. Management has threatened the workers about any line stoppage. The union is still in hiding.

“The company and union have been hiding most confirmed cases and we are getting pissed at both the

company and the union. We can't get real answers and are very frustrated about this.”

Another worker described the rising tensions in the plant and the impossible situation workers are being forced into. “Things are about to get wild in Toledo. They are forcing every single one of the 1,600-plus SEs [temporary supplemental employees] to report every day.

“Last week they told full-timers they could not use PAA [paid allowed absence] on weekends anymore. Today they told full-timers no more pick days [select days off during the week].

“COVID is running rampant through the plant with no contact tracing. People are being fired for not wearing masks properly when there's no airflow. AC pretty much nonexistent in some places. We are at our breaking point.”

Both FCA and the UAW are increasingly nervous over the growing unrest in the auto plants and are seeking to subdue opposition among workers.

On Monday, management personnel around the country read a letter from FCA's head of manufacturing, Mike Resha, which threatened workers with termination if they stop production. “FCA will investigate any unauthorized work stoppage and will appropriately, immediately and decisively act on the employee that was found to have unnecessarily instigated such activities,” the letter stated. The company said it would take disciplinary action against workers accused of misreporting information on COVID screening questionnaires, in an attempt to shift blame for the spread of the virus onto the backs of workers.

The letter is “completely subjective and literally

holding people hostage to the job,” an FCA worker in Kokomo, Indiana said. “If you get sick at work: can be fired. If everyone falls over cause of COVID and you walk off job: fired. We were told that anyone getting sick at work would be investigated and FCA would determine if the sick individual violated the questionnaire we are made to fill out daily. If they can prove you were exposed to COVID and didn’t answer the questionnaire correctly: fired. Even if you have no idea you were exposed to someone with COVID and they determined you were...fired.”

A nearly 40-year veteran at Toledo FCA pointed to the Catch-22 workers are being placed in. “If you fill that form out and say you have it you have to go on quarantine for 14 days. A lot of guys can’t do that with all the bills to pay!”

The worker said there should be regular and widespread testing for the coronavirus at the plants. “I think it’d be a good idea a couple times a day to go down the line and take their temp and swab in the morning. Why not? That would help out a hundred percent!”

“With all these temps, they’re paying them half price compared to the old timers. And they’re making a killing. The company can do more, but they don’t want to spend a nickel. They won’t fix anything until somebody dies from a safety error, then they fix it.

The UAW, far from opposing FCA’s threats against workers, issued a joint letter with the company Wednesday which sought to evade responsibility for the spread of COVID in the plants and offload the blame onto workers.

Signed by both UAW President Rory Gamble—who is under investigation in the UAW bribery scandal—and FCA CEO Michael Manley, the statement admonishes workers to follow safety precautions, such as handwashing, social distancing and avoiding contact with those who are sick, which they well know are difficult to impossible inside the plants. Cynically, the letter states, “Coming to work when you’re not feeling well or falsifying health information puts others at risk and compromises the safe work environment we are trying to create.”

“You are literally between a rock and a hard place,” Johnny said. “Every day and every week it keeps getting worse.

“The PPE that we’re given has written on it that it

does not protect against COVID-19. The masks break very easily. I went through six in one day. They are a joke, they’re garbage.

“Our plant has always been a gutter, nasty conditions. The only reason we even got running water or soap in the bathrooms is because we shut the plant down. They’re not doing a thing.

“According to local union representatives, no one has contracted COVID-19 from anyone else in the plant,” he continued. “I don’t know how the hell they know that, and I don’t believe that.

“The union and the company are trying to condition us so that we fall in line. The UAW want to keep getting their union dues. They’re trying to keep the line running. ‘Be happy you got a job.’ The UAW bylaws have been violated on the international and local level repeatedly in a manner that says, ‘We’re better than you guys.’”

Johnny said that the corruption and bribery revealed in the UAW so far is “just the tip of the iceberg. [Former UAW Presidents] Dennis Williams, Gary Jones, how are we to think the people they appointed have even an ounce of respect for us? No way they have our interests at heart. There is no way the people they put into office are going to do anything for us.

“Now we have to figure out how we can fight them. We’re seeing the civil unrest all over the country, we need to have that within FCA, Ford, GM. The company, the union, they’re all just lying to us.”

Rank-and-file committees “need to happen everywhere,” he said. “The company needs to be held responsible for our safety. That’s what these rank-and-file safety committees need to do.

“This is my livelihood, this is my life, this is my family, these are my friends. And to have the company and the union stick it to us together is infuriating.”

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