

“A rank-and-file safety committee is exactly what we need”

Toledo Jeep workers demand action after dozens test positive for COVID-19

By Jerry White
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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.

Anger is reaching a breaking point at Fiat Chrysler's Toledo Assembly Complex after reports that more than 26 workers have been infected with COVID-19. Over 6,500 workers manufacture Jeep Gladiators and Wranglers at the 312-acre complex in northern Ohio.

Workers not only face the danger of contracting the deadly disease and transmitting it to their loved ones. Temperatures in Toledo reached the 90s this week and it is becoming unbearable to work 10 hours shifts or more in the poorly ventilated plant while wearing a facemask.

“Someone passed out on the line,” one worker informed the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* from inside the plant on Wednesday evening. “Suspected heart attack. Didn't even stop the line.”

Ohio has had near record reports of new infections over the last week and as of this writing had 60,000 confirmed cases and nearly 3,000 deaths. Lucas County, which includes Toledo, has had 2,300 cases and 303 deaths.

As in other auto plants, corporate management and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union are deliberately concealing information about the spread of the virus from factory workers. However, workers have exposed the horrific conditions in the plant through Facebook pages popular among Jeep workers and through the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*.

Earlier this week, a union steward posted that he had tested positive for COVID-19. “As a steward, I travel the whole plant,” he wrote, making it clear he could have infected many workers. “All of you go get tested,” he warned. “If you don't know you have it and continue to go about your day as you are, you might be asymptomatic, and infecting others. They simply need to shut it down for a minute, it's not safe here.”

In another post, a Jeep worker reported, “Three people in HR were sent home because they may have come in contact with someone who may have COVID-19. Two bosses from stock, 6 people from one stock team, two union people. One Steward

and one committee person.”

Far from closing the plant, the UAW has worked with management to assure that there is no disruption of production and corporate profit-making. Union officials have joined FCA management in covering up the spread of infections and threatening to fire any workers engaged in work stoppages over unsafe conditions.

“FCA is refusing to test workers who were exposed from other workers without enough symptoms,” a Toledo Jeep worker told the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*: “There were 26-29 positive results reported by the UAW committee alone today. Union still sitting on their hands letting the company run everything.”

Another Jeep worker told the WSWs, “My co-workers I have spoken with have told me that the company and union have been hiding most confirmed cases and they are getting pissed...The membership needs answers and the elected union leadership are hiding behind closed doors with management. The company and the UAW are two peas in a pod down in Toledo.”

In a Facebook post, one worker detailed conditions that can only be described as inhuman. “Someone just got carried out on a stretcher for an ‘underlying condition.’ Also, there was nobody at the thermal body scanners this morning (rumor is she got walked out cause management got word she was telling people the cameras do not work!) so everybody walked in JT paint this morning with no body temperature check.”

Another post read, “There's a supervisor on first that admitted to an employee he was sick with a fever but guess what? He's still working.”

Another worker reported, “Just left HR to get reinstated after learning of being exposed last week. The nurse said no one even documented that I was exposed, that's why I never got a phone call from them about what to do after learning of exposure.” Commenting on this post, another worker replied, “They want to keep the numbers down.”

Workers also spoke about “storming” the union committee room like they had done during a wildcat strike last March. The job action was part of several which took place at FCA plants

in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Canada that forced the two-month shutdown of the auto industry. Fearing another revolt, workers said, UAW officials have locked the door to the committee room “supposedly for social distancing.” But this was “More like distancing from accountability,” another worker replied.

FCA workers at the Jefferson North (JNAP) and Sterling Heights (SHAP) assembly plants in the Detroit area carried out work stoppages in late June after management and the UAW refused to confirm cases in their plants or take any serious measures to protect workers. That is when workers at JNAP and SHAP decided to set up their own rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, to monitor and enforce safety conditions.

Responding to the reports of the COVID-19 outbreak at the Toledo plant, the Jefferson North and Sterling Heights Rank-and-File Safety Committees declared, “Workers at Toledo Jeep have every right to stop production over the spread of COVID-19 and dangerous conditions in their plant. They should set up a rank-and-file safety committee, like we have done at JNAP and SHAP.

“The reports from Toledo make it clear that conditions are unsafe, and management and the UAW are doing nothing about it. A safety committee would insist that the plant be immediately closed for 24 hours so that deep cleaning can be done. Workers have to demand real social distancing because everybody is in danger of infection. There must be immediate and regular testing, full pay for workers off for medical reasons, and a ten-minute break every hour to remove your masks and catch your breath. If there is not a safe working environment, then no one should work until there is.”

Inspired by the bold initiative of the Detroit FCA workers, Toledo workers told the WSWS, “We’re working 6 days, 10 hours and our pick days [paid time off] were cancelled. No social distancing whatsoever between shifts. We need help here. We need a rank-and-file committee.”

“A rank-and-file safety committee is exactly what we need,” Johnny, a veteran Toledo Jeep worker said. “We are working under unsafe and inhumane conditions. If we had a safety committee of our own, we would shut down and stop working until the conditions got better.”

Referring to conditions in the plant, Johnny said, “Managers are getting sick, a union steward got sick. When workers go to medical if they are not feeling well, they are told its too busy or too full. The medical staff is incompetent. Several months ago, a worker had a brain aneurysm and he was refused medical care and told to drive himself to the hospital where he got put into an ICU.

“It’s a hundred degrees in there and people are dropping. There is minimal air conditioning, or they are blowing hot air in from the outside. Management hands out two bottles of warm water to us around lunch and at the end of the shift.”

Denouncing the claims that the plant is regularly sanitized,

Johnny said, “There is a water station where workers are supposed to fill up their bottles, with cold water or hot water for soups and things. But the last time they cleaned it was sometime in March.”

Johnny pointed to the plans to reopen schools even as the pandemic continues to rip through the population. “To reopen is unsafe and careless. I can see wanting to get back to normal but not when things are so dangerous for everybody right now. You got a lot of grandparents or in-laws watching children. If the kids are sent back into the schools, they will bring the disease home and end up burying their grandparents who died from COVID-19.

“With the threats to cut off unemployment benefits, it’s like the corporations and the government are holding a gun to our heads. Work or end up homeless. It’s becoming an unsafe environment everywhere, at work or in school, or in the stores. The companies want us back to work. The union wants us back to work. But workers want a safe environment and we’re going to have to organize ourselves to fight for it.”

Workers in other plants are also looking to take action. With cases rising at record rates in Texas and the Dallas-Ft. Worth area, workers at the General Motors Arlington Assembly Plant, where there are at least 22 confirmed cases, have also called for the plant to be closed. The same is true at the GM Wentzville, Missouri plant, near St. Louis, where at least 16 cases have been reported.

The Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee has reported 26 coronavirus cases.

The situation for hundreds of thousands of parts workers is just as bad, if not worse. A worker at Adient LLC a supplier for FCA, told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “We’ve had our first instance of Covid at our plant. A line supervisor has tested positive, and the management is basically telling us if you have been exposed to him for less than 15 mins to lie on our return to work survey.”

A worker at the Lear plant in Hammond, Indiana, outside of Chicago, told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “Hey, heads up. There are several new covid cases at Lear...at least four confirmed. The only way we know is the Facebook posts. The company is keeping it hush. Several of us have been exposed and haven’t gotten a phone call to get tested or to quarantine. Also, the guy who tested positive posted on Facebook that Lear told him not to tell anyone he tested positive.”

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