

North American autoworkers expand fight against unsafe conditions amid COVID-19 nightmare

By Shannon Jones
11 July 2020

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter will assist autoworkers and other workers in establishing rank-and-file safety committees. Email the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org to learn more.

Opposition is mounting among autoworkers in North America to the premature return to work imposed by the corporations with the support of unions. COVID-19 is spreading in factories and warehouses under conditions where basic safety protocols are being ignored in the drive to ramp up production and where workers who resist are being victimized by management with the blatant collusion of the unions.

At the Fiat Chrysler Toledo Assembly Complex in Ohio, workers have decided to launch a rank-and-file safety committee in response to mounting COVID-19 cases at their plant. The courageous stand of the Toledo workers follows the launching of rank-and-file safety committees at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, Michigan and the nearby Sterling Heights Assembly in the northern suburbs.

Reports have reached the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* of support for such a rank-and-file initiative at the Ford Louisville Truck plant as well, where workers staged a protest this week over lack of safety enforcement.

Despite the upsurge of the deadly virus, the United Auto Workers and management are withholding basic information from workers while collaborating to ramp up production at whatever cost.

The *Toledo Blade* reported yesterday that 31 workers have tested positive at the plant since its reopening in May. This figure is likely a vast underestimate, under conditions where management has refused to

acknowledge any infections. Production at the 312-acre complex has continued uninterrupted, without any pause for cleaning. The plant employs some 6,500 workers and produces the Jeep Gladiators and Wranglers.

In Ohio, 1,525 COVID-19 cases were recorded Friday, the highest daily total yet, bringing the total to date to 62,856. There were 26 deaths reported, bringing the total statewide to just over 3,000.

One Toledo FCA worker wrote to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “Today I had someone working directly next to me for 10 hours with nothing protecting me besides a thin face mask. This person only quarantined for three days and was told to report back after traveling. What are we to do really? We don’t have the company with our best interest or the union.

“I’m asking you to please bring awareness and further investigate the issues and threats made at the Toledo assembly complex. We are all just trying to protect ourselves with no help and no one to turn to for honest answers.”

Another Jeep worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “An employee was carted out of my area on the line and employees were told not to disclose the situation. One employee quit because of this situation and divulged to us as she was walking out. They didn’t shut down, they didn’t deep clean, they just stopped the line to find a replacement and kept running...”

“They do not care about our health, safety, nor do they care about safety of our families,” the worker remarked about the response of corporate management and UAW officials in the plant.

Yet another Jeep worker told the *Autoworker*

Newsletter, “They give us a bottle of 70-proof alcohol with some rags and we’re supposed to clean the machines with that. The rags are like old t-shirts from out of someone’s car. It’s not safe. We’re constantly on top of each other. You can’t social distance in the plant.”

“All they’re worried about is making money. They’re not notifying everybody who is in contact with a positive case. I have a friend who tested positive. How do they know who’s in contact with who? They didn’t even let her team know. She took it upon herself to contact her team members and tell them.”

Deplorably unsafe conditions are rampant throughout the auto plants and parts suppliers. A worker at the Ford Louisville Assembly Plant posted on Facebook about developments Thursday, “They shut down the entire body 2 to go cover jobs where covid is because most of them signed out. 90 % of body 2 walked off and signed out as well instead of going to the infected area. Now THAT is SOLIDARITY!”

A veteran worker at the General Motors Wentzville Assembly plant near St. Louis told the WSWS that reported cases had neared 20 on Thursday and have jumped further since then. She said that GM was deeming them “outside cases,” denying that they were resulting from exposure within the plant. “How can they say these aren’t GM related when we are exposed every day?” she asked. “Why not take temperatures when we clock out too, since they only do it clocking in?”

The situation is even worse at auto parts plants. A worker at Flex-N-Gate in Detroit wrote, “They give you points [i.e., disciplinary marks for being absent] even when you have a doctor’s note, when they weren’t doing this before. I have been here for almost two years and it breaks my heart that so many of us have to put up with these conditions.”

Another auto parts worker wrote, “I’m hearing from an employee at Piston Automotive [outside Detroit] that there was an employee puking at work and was sent home. Before the employee left and was sent home he stated that his mother tested positive for COVID-19. Also, another employee went into work stating he was around someone that had it. I’m writing to ask if this can be investigated as we have a family at home, with one child having asthma so you’ll see why I’m very concerned.”

in Mexico, where cases of coronavirus are exploding, workers are seeking to mobilize resistance to the return to work policy of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The country has over 282,000 confirmed cases and more than 33,500 deaths due to the pandemic.

Workers at the General Motors Silao Complex in Guanajuato, Mexico, have reported to the *Autoworker Newsletter* a total of 17 COVID-19 cases and five deaths. Management and the union refuse to recognize any suspected or confirmed cases and have forced workers to sign three “confidentiality agreements” this year to keep them from speaking to anyone about conditions at the plant.

The Silao plant is running at about 80 percent capacity, even though the state of Guanajuato is on a “red light” status, meaning that auto plants are technically only allowed to run at 30 percent capacity. Hospitals in the state are overwhelmed by the pandemic.

At the plant, the rank-and-file Generating Movement group, which is encouraging workers to report infections and unsafe conditions, told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that the latest death was that of Gilberto Medrano Ramírez, 57, on Thursday. GM sent him home on July 2, according to a document signed by a doctor at the plant’s Occupational Health Department, which describes “an infection of his airways” classified as “suspected COVID-19.” The state health care agency IMSS, however, sent him away without testing for the virus.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>