

Rank-and-file safety committee demands immediate shut down COVID-19 out of control at Toledo Jeep plant

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.

The number of COVID-19 cases are rising rapidly in auto plants across the United States, with Fiat Chrysler's Toledo Assembly Complex in northwest Ohio becoming an epicenter. This week local United Auto Workers (UAW) officials admitted that there are 40 confirmed cases at the Toledo plant, but rank-and-file workers believe the number is far higher.

"It's been crazy in here," a young Toledo Jeep worker told the WSWs. "Everyone in there has been exposed to someone who has it. If you say you have it, you are going to go a while without pay. I have a wife and kids, so I can't take that chance." The company and the UAW are not telling workers anything, he said. "We are informing each other on Facebook. We are doing it ourselves."

He added, "They said there were going to do all these things to open the plants up safely, but they never abided by that. They said that just to get everybody back. At the same time, they are being very petty. If your safety glasses fall off because of your mask, they will write you up. If you ask any questions about safety, they will get you with something. They are definitely retaliating. Imagine how hard it is to wear a mask. It's over 90 degrees in there and we are sweating."

It is two months since the May 18 reopening of the North American auto industry, which was a key component of the Trump administration's reckless push to restart the US economy. The deadly consequences have been revealed by the record number of daily cases and the rise in the number of total infections over the last two months from 1.5 million to 3.6 million and the number of deaths from 90,000 to 140,000.

The restart of the auto factories, backed by Democratic and Republican governors alike, has led to outbreaks in plants across the US. There have been 130 cases confirmed at the Tesla factory in Fremont, California, which was reopened by CEO Elon Musk in defiance of lockdown orders. The reopening of the plant has led to a surge in Tesla's stock prices, adding \$30 billion to Musk's personal fortune. According to an internal Tesla memo, over 1,550 of the 10,000 employees at the plant have been "affected" by COVID-19,

i.e., either infected or had contact with someone infected.

There have also been outbreaks at GM plants in Missouri, Texas, Indiana and Michigan. GM is transferring laid-off workers to several of these plants because hundreds of workers have taken leaves or called off because of concerns about the virus, according to a report in the *Detroit Free Press* Wednesday.

At the GM assembly plant in Fort Wayne, Indiana, nearly 1,000 of the 4,100 workers are off for various reasons, with as many as 200 workers for COVID-19-related reasons. At the Flint assembly plant, there are 600 workers on some type of leave of absence, and another 100 on "COVID leave." The latter includes workers "who have an immune disorder and cannot work, or they are in quarantine due to exposure to someone who tested positive for the COVID-19, or they have to care for someone with the virus," the *Free Press* wrote.

Workers at the Silao, Mexico, assembly complex—which produces GM's highly profitable pickup trucks along with the Fort Wayne and Flint plants—have reported that six workers have died from COVID-19 and scores have been infected.

On Wednesday, Michigan's Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, warned that the auto plants could be closed down again due to the spread of the virus. She did not admit, however, that the reopening of the factories—which she approved in early May—has accelerated the spread. Instead, she blamed it on individuals not wearing masks outside. "If Michiganders don't mask up when we go out in public, cases could rise and we could be forced to close down more of our businesses, including auto manufacturing plants that employ thousands."

The automakers and the UAW have sought to conceal the extent of infections and replace sick workers quickly in order to prevent any disruption of production. However, workers have begun to take matters into their own hands. After carrying out wildcat work stoppages in late June, Fiat Chrysler (FCA) workers at two Detroit-area assembly plants—Jefferson North and Sterling Heights—formed rank-and-file safety committees, independently of the UAW. This was followed by the formation of a similar committee in Toledo.

In a statement Wednesday, the Toledo Jeep Rank-and-File Safety Committee denounced FCA management and UAW

Local 12 for “intentionally withholding critical information about COVID-19 positive workers” and called on workers to “stand up against these unsafe and dangerous working conditions.”

The committee listed a series of demands, including, “The Toledo Assembly Complex **MUST** be shut down and all employees that wish to be tested, must be tested for free. Nobody is to return to work until all test results have come in. Just testing ‘potential’ cases is unsafe and still poses a threat to the safety of others.”

Others included:

- We demand all positive COVID-19 cases be listed on the HUB home page with line, shift and team number.

- We demand an immediate end to the abuse of Supplemental Employees as COVID-19 fill-ins. These are humans, not collateral damage pawns.

- When a case of COVID-19 is confirmed, production must stop for at least 24 hours and deep cleaning of the whole plant conducted by a trained and licensed company.

- If the workforce is required to work with a mask, we require 10 minutes of down time per hour to breathe freely, hydrate and cool down.

- Reduce to 8-hour shifts to allow a trained and licensed company to clean all tools, break areas, bathrooms and water stations between shifts. All turnstiles must be cleaned 30 minutes after shift start, end of lunch and end of shift daily.

- Workers will not be targeted, reprimanded, terminated, or otherwise disciplined or harassed for taking time off to wait for testing or results.

- Any and all employees who were fired for taking time off for testing must be reinstated with back pay and proper time accredited towards their seniority.

- Eliminate all resistance to medically approved mask alternatives as prescribed by a licensed physician.

The statement concluded: “We, the Toledo Jeep Rank-and-File Safety Committee, stand in solidarity with workers throughout the auto industry in the US and internationally and encourage each and every one of you to stand with us against the efforts of the auto companies and the

UAW to keep production running no matter what the cost to our lives. We stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of the rank-and-file safety committees at both JNAP and SHAP! It is time to take back our lives and not allow corporate greed to endanger us and the people we love!”

The spread of cases at Toledo has alarmed workers everywhere and many others are taking up the call for rank-and-file safety committees. “We have three confirmed cases at Sterling Heights Stamping,” a worker reported to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “I’m sure that’s how it started in Toledo and now it’s out of control. The same thing will happen here if we don’t do something.

“We are talking about setting up a committee here just like at Toledo, SHAP and Jefferson. The UAW and management are not doing anything to be proactive. The temperature checks can’t find people without symptoms. Why can’t they test us all the time, like they do the NBA athletes? Governor Whitmer isn’t protecting us, and you know the president isn’t. As for the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], the company is ignoring the guidelines to shut a plant down for deep cleaning after a confirmed case, and the CDC is giving the companies all the leeway not to follow the guidelines.

“It is up to the employees on the shop floor to protect ourselves. Management doesn’t want us to shut down production because of their profits. It isn’t going to come from the UAW hierarchy with all the corruption and payoffs. Our union rep just told several people he doesn’t think COVID is real or a concern, and this is the man who’s supposed to protect our safety.

“Workers are going to have to stand up for ourselves, like the workers at JNAP and SHAP, and at the meatpacking plant in Colorado. It’s not going to stop until workers in every plant set up committees like in Toledo.”

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