

“As COVID spreads, autoworkers lives are in danger!”

Fiat Chrysler worker describes rapid abandonment of safety measures after return work

By a Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly worker
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The following article, which describes Fiat Chrysler’s flouting of its own safety measures, was written by a member of the FCA Jefferson North Assembly Rank and File Safety Committee.

Schools are reopening in Detroit and across the country, and COVID-19 cases are on the rise. In the auto industry, every day we come to work, our lives are in danger because our health and safety are not being protected by the United Auto Workers (UAW) or management.

In March, we at Fiat Chrysler’s Jefferson North Assembly Plant were fed up with the growing number of employees with the coronavirus and the lack of communication to workers. FCA workers at plants throughout the area, including at JNAP, Sterling Heights and Toledo, staged wildcat strikes that led to a nationwide shutdown of the industry.

We did this on our own, because the attitude of the UAW has been clear from the start: whatever the company wants to do, they can. The UAW has helped the company get out from under its own safety procedures, knowing we are at high risk of catching the virus.

The UAW has gone along at every step with management. Even worse, management and the UAW are hiding cases of the disease in the plant. This conspiracy of silence makes it impossible for workers to protect themselves.

Instead, workers have to find out from Facebook or word-of-mouth if workers get the virus. For example, we found out that a worker at Jefferson North was told she had possibly been exposed to COVID, but they

wouldn’t let her go home to quarantine because they were short-staffed. This kind of thing happens all the time.

In effectively pursuing a policy of herd immunity, the automakers also enjoy the support of not only the Trump administration but the Democratic Party. The automakers were given the green light to reopen in May by Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. She made the decision knowing that she was putting us in a death trap.

To lure workers back to the plants, they implemented certain sanitation and safety protocols—at first. Once we returned, we saw hand sanitizer at every team’s workstation, thermal imaging machines at the entrances and daily health surveys.

They provided eyewear and masks at the entrance. The company also provided an extra five minutes on each break to promote social distance when going to restrooms. The line also started 10 minutes later into the shift to allow for cleaning of work stations, and lunch tables were divided. They even provided rags and spray bottles with cleaning solution at every job and on each team.

Things sounded too good to be true. It turns out that they were. Two months into the reopening, things slowly but surely changed—fewer cleaning bottles, fewer rags, empty spray bottles and fewer extra minutes on break. The company has made the decision to disregard the employees’ health and safety.

The company used to clean an area where an infected employee worked. If a team member was exposed, the whole team was paid by FCA to quarantine. Now there

are no more cleanings and no more paid time off for quarantine. They complain that the employees aren't cleaning, but there hasn't been any cleaning solution at any station for months.

When you pass through the thermal imaging stations at the entrance to JNAP, most of the time the person operating the machine waves you through while they are talking to someone—they never even look at you. And when they check for a green pass, which indicates that you have passed that day's health check, they don't verify the day of the week to be sure a worker hasn't duplicated a previous day.

All the health and safety precautions were dismantled by the company to get workers back and change the narrative. Now, here at JNAP, it's "protect yourself" because the company will be the very reason we catch COVID.

Slowly but surely FCA went back to business as usual. They are not concerned with anything but the dollar! By removing even the bare minimum precautions, they have shown us that as long as they make money, anything goes.

As far as the UAW and management are concerned, it doesn't matter if we get COVID. They just want bodies to mass-produce vehicles.

The only way we as workers can oppose this is by organizing ourselves. The UAW will not do it. OSHA will not do it. As a member of the Jefferson North Rank and File Safety Committee, I urge workers to join the rank-and-file safety committee at your own plant to protect lives and health!

These are our demands—

1. Workers must be immediately notified of any cases of COVID-19 and what areas were affected. This information cannot be kept secret from workers.

2. When there's a case confirmed, the factory should be closed for 24 hours for deep cleaning, not just the affected area, but the whole plant. Preventive maintenance is needed to ensure a safe and comfortable working environment.

3. Social distancing must be implemented when entering and leaving the plant and during bathroom, lunch and other break times.

4. The line must be stopped for 10 minutes

every hour to enable workers to take off their masks, rest and cool off.

5. Workers must have regular, universal testing. Temperature checks and self-reporting symptoms are not enough.

6. If conditions are not safe, workers have the right to refuse to work without threat of retaliation by management and the union.

To contact the JNAP Rank and File Safety Committee, or for help establishing a committee at your own plant, contact the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>