SHUT DOWN THE PLANTS! AUTOWORKERS MUST TAKE HEALTH AND SAFETY INTO OUR OWN HANDS



BY WILL LEHMAN
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For three days now, tens of millions of workers across the United States and Canada have been ordered into air that our own governments have officially classified as unfit to breathe, and in all that time not a single auto plant has been told to stop production.

Detroit has had the worst air pollution on the planet for two days running, dirtier than it has ever been since records began there. In Pennsylvania, where I work on the floor at Mack Trucks in Macungie, the Department of Environmental Protection declared a Code Red across every county on Thursday, meaning the air was unhealthy for everyone, and my plant went in as usual. All of this sits on top of a heat wave pushing past 100 degrees and a cyclosporiasis outbreak that has sickened thousands, centered in Michigan, the heart of the auto industry.

At Ford's Michigan Assembly Plant in Wayne, smoke and heat of 88 to 100 degrees filled the building through the night and into the morning, and several dozen workers on the line were sent to medical. Some were carried out on stretchers and taken to hospitals by ambulance. Workers report roughly a dozen more ambulance runs at Dearborn Truck. At Nexteer, 188 workers refused to go in at all. Sterling Heights Assembly workers discussed walking out Wednesday night because the conditions were so bad.

Ford, GM and Stellantis kept every facility running, and each offered the same defense: the readings inside are below OSHA limits.

Here is what they are not telling you. OSHA has no exposure limit for the fine particles in wildfire smoke. It does not exist. The only standard covering the particles themselves is a catch-all nuisance-dust rule, and OSHA kept that number on the books for one reason: nobody ever studied what is in the dust. It permits 5,000 micrograms of particulate per cubic meter of air. The EPA tells the public the air is hazardous at 250. So when Ford says its readings are "well below OSHA permissible exposure limits," the company is telling us only that the air we breathe for ten hours is somewhere under twenty times the level at which the government tells us to stay in the house.

And what has been the response of the UAW?

From an air-conditioned office at Solidarity House, UAW President Shawn Fain posted a statement on Facebook conceding that extreme heat combined with hazardous air "creates an unsafe work environment." He went further and named the remedy himself, calling for "shutting down work if hazardous air quality cannot be mitigated" by ventilation or masks. Then, while workers were being loaded into ambulances, he did nothing whatsoever. Instead, his statement advised members to "contact their local union representatives" and pledged to "rigorously enforce our contracts." Not one directive went out to a local. Not one worker was authorized to stop. Not one plant closed.

Under the "act of God" language in the contracts this apparatus negotiated and signed, closing a plant for a natural disaster means reduced pay for us, and a worker who walks out to save his own lungs can be handed three days on the street without pay. That contract does not defend our right to leave a poisoned building; it punishes us for trying. Fain is not failing to enforce it. It is working exactly as designed.

This is what the bureaucracy is: several hundred officials in air conditioned rooms, living off the dues taken out of our checks, producing nothing and defending nothing, serving as the corporations' labor relations department. They are parasites on the working class, and they have to be thrown out.

Hundreds of workers answered Fain underneath his own Facebook post, and not one of them was fooled.

Ronald, on the chassis line at Michigan Assembly, wrote that "press releases do not stop ambulances." Ed described how the company takes its "air readings by the

doorway where the wind blows through like a wind tunnel," with the union reps standing there watching it happen. Aysha wrote that medical overflowed with respiratory cases, and that co-workers were too afraid to ask to be seen.

It must be stated plainly. There are two forces in this union: the workers who build the cars and pay the dues, and an apparatus that did not stop one line this week to save one life.

Everything we have was won through struggle. The workers who seized the Flint plants 90 years ago this winter were fighting a speedup that broke bodies, machinery that maimed men who were replaced before the next shift, and companies that counted a death as a cost of production. They did not petition anyone. They occupied their plants. And in March 2020, as COVID-19 spread and the UAW joined the companies in insisting the plants were safe, autoworkers walked out in wildcat strikes that shut this industry down and forced the initial lockdowns that saved countless lives.

Our war with the companies and union bureaucrats never ended. At least 15 workers are killed on the job in this country every single day, more than 5,200 a year, with another 135,000 dying of diseases they contracted at work. Worldwide, nearly 3 million workers lose their lives every year, roughly 8,000 a day. What we breathed this week is another front in the same war, arriving as smoke.

I call on autoworkers to build rank-and-file committees at every plant to fight for the following:

Stop all non-essential production now! Every non-essential workplace in the smoke zone, including auto plants, must be closed, every worker paid in full, and no discipline against anyone who refuses to enter.

Respirators that work for all essential workers! We must be provided with N95 or P100 respirators, fit-tested, at company expense, for all essential workers. No waivers. No surgical masks.

Modernize all workplaces to guarantee clean air! Every plant and workplace must be renovated with MERV-13 or better filters in every HVAC unit, HEPA filtration on the floor, and air conditioning in every plant and warehouse. These corporations reap billions in profits every year. The money exists to protect workers' lives.

Monitoring under workers' control! Instruments must be placed by workers in our own breathing zones, with results posted on the floor as they are taken, not readings taken in a doorway and rubber-stamped by company officials.

Nobody will hand us these safety measures. Build rank-and-file committees in your workplace, independent of the apparatus, elected by you and your trusted workers and answerable to you alone, to fight for workers' safety. These committees must link up across plants and across borders, because the smoke does not stop at Windsor, and our brothers and sisters in Canada and Mexico work for the same corporations and breathe the same air.

And understand what this crisis is. Canada is having a below-average fire season by area burned, and it still produced the worst air in Detroit's history. That is not misfortune. It is the product of a society that subordinates everything to private profit. Confronting climate change means planning economic life rationally, on a world scale, according to science and human need rather than the balance sheets of the billionaire oligarchs.

I am running for president of the UAW, nominated from the convention floor in Detroit last month, and safety has stood at the center of my program from the first day. If elected, I will not move into Solidarity House. I will stay on the shop floor and deepen the fight to build rank-and-file committees at every UAW facility.

You are not putting me in office. You are putting yourselves in control.

Shut down the plants. Build rank-and-file committees. Join this campaign today.

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR WORKERS' POWER!

Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

willforuawpresident.org/get-involved