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Manufacturing Through COVID-19 – Serious Problems

In Summer 1967, as a 19-year old college student, your blogger worked on the piston pin line at Ford's Brook Park Cleveland Engine Plant #2. He earned \$3.40 per hour (well over \$25 today, adjusted for inflation – they don't have those jobs for college students anymore). He worked from 3:30 pm to midnight, so he couldn't spend the money partying after work. He was able to pay for his next year of college as an out-of-state student at The University of Michigan.

Economist Paul Romer was on NPR today talking about the possibility of people going back to work if they were healthy, and if they were tested, possibly every two weeks. In principle, if workable, this is a net positive since the apparent marginal benefits exceed the marginal costs. More production is better than zero production; positive wages are better than zero wages. Paul Romer is an outstanding Nobel Laureate economist. Your blogger doesn't know him personally, but he would be proud to consider him a friend. That said, he believes that this advice is misguided.

The logistics are daunting. In a factory, there are surfaces everywhere. There is air and sweat everywhere. Although things almost certainly have changed, at the Cleveland Engine Plant #2 they had dropped a wall to 7 feet above the floor, to keep the heat and fumes from dissipating to the rest of the plant. Think of the impact of one sneezing worker on an assembly line.

At the end of the shift, workers go home, possibly to pick up more infection and bring it back. Testing every two weeks will not catch the person whose spouse or child, or neighborhood grocer, was exposed last night. The only way to avoid this is to put the workers in dormitories, closing the system, and limiting the infection. It is feasible, but it is expensive, and it is unlikely that American workers would accept it ... for very long.

University professors live good lives. Our work is not physically strenuous, and not done in strenuous conditions, and we work with exciting peers and students. We have moved our current courses online and we can do it from home. It is a mistake to believe that large parts of the manufacturing economy can do the same.

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