

“What happened to the eight hour day?”

GM workers in Lansing oppose forced overtime, UAW treachery

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In the aftermath of the United Auto Workers' betrayal of last fall's 40-day strike, General Motors is forcing workers throughout the country to work overtime. Over a half-dozen facilities in Michigan have been on “emergency status” since workers returned to the plants in October.

The company, which lost \$3.6 billion due to the strike but still made an operating profit of \$8.4 billion in 2019, is determined to get back its pound of flesh. Workers are being forced to work six or even seven days a week, for nine to twelve hours per day. GM is doing this with the support of the UAW, which worked behind closed doors with the company to force through historic concessions in the latest contract, including a blank check on the use of temporary workers.

The eight-hour day, one of the main social achievements of the working class gained through decades of struggle, was a thing of the past for many autoworkers even before the strike. The UAW sanctioned the destruction of the eight-hour day through the “Alternative Work Schedule” in 2012. Moreover, the collapse in wages has forced many autoworkers to seek second and third jobs. Eighty-hour workweeks across multiple jobs are not uncommon.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has received many requests from autoworkers to expose the conditions in these factories. Acting on a tip from a worker, we went to Lansing, Michigan, last week to speak to workers at GM's Delta Township complex during their shift change. According to workers, the plant is operating on “emergency status” through the month of August—over 10 months after the end of the strike.

There are roughly 2,800 workers at the plant, who

manufacture the Buick Enclave and Chevy Traverse. Delta Township was one of several plants where workers voted down the UAW contract, 810 to 1090.

The first worker we spoke with said that she needed the work to catch up on bills, because of the hardship caused by the miserable \$250 per week strike pay paid out by the union. The UAW uses its \$760 million strike fund as a piggy bank for top officials, who continued to earn their full salaries during the strike.

“The schedule is brutal, but we have no choice,” she said. Under “emergency status” all scheduled production is compulsory.

“Two years ago a union official told us that the normal work week was no longer 40 hours,” she said. “It was now 54 hours he was saying. Now we're working 60 hours a week.”

“But wasn't [the eight-hour day] the foundation of the AFL-CIO and all the unions?” she asked. “We were just talking about it [on the shop floor] today.

“The Civil War and the American Revolution were long ago, but they were not that long ago. It was only a few generations. We are still fighting for the same things today that they were fighting for back then: education, fair housing, work, the eight-hour day.”

As the shift ended, another assembler responded to our questions by repeating one, “What happened to the eight-hour day?” he asked glaring and indignant. “The UAW gave it back, along with a lot of things.”

“We work 50-plus hours every week,” said another. “Five times out of the year we can call in and get a day off. This contract and the previous contracts have been a joke,” he continued. “I don't know why we were on strike for six weeks if this is what the contract is like.

“The contract for temps is a joke,” he added. “I was

talking to a woman who is pregnant. If they hire replacements while she's out having her baby, she will get passed over and lose her chance to get rolled over [to full-time]. That's not right. The eight-hour day is out the window. The UAW is a joke."

Another worker expressed his support for the Silao Seven, Mexican GM workers fired for supporting the strike in the US. "That's good to know they were supporting workers in the US," another added. "When it comes to war, climate and our living conditions, they are all connected. The only way to fight a global corporation is to unite across the world."

"The contract was terrible before, and it's terrible now," added a workmate. "I look at the union like I look at the US government: corruption in the government, corruption in the UAW. If they cut my wages, they don't lower the price of the trucks."

He was particularly angered by the gross inequalities imposed across the industry over decades of concessions, bankruptcies and spin-offs that took parts divisions from the big three into low-paid suppliers which now constitute more than two-thirds of all auto production.

"Mary Barra makes \$22 million a year with a bonus. They get all their money from the workers who make \$6.00 and \$7.00 an hour making parts. I just do the assembly. It's like Capitol Hill. They won't slit their own throats to stop making money for themselves."

The UAW's abandonment of the eight-hour day is one of the clearest expressions of its transformation into an arm of management. The eight-hour day was won after titanic class battles spanning 150 years. "Out of the death of slavery, a new and vigorous life at once arose," wrote Karl Marx in *Capital*. "The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours agitation, which ran with the speed of an express train from the Atlantic to the Pacific."

A decade after the Civil War, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 erupted in class warfare, to be suppressed only by military violence. The workers movement fought back converging on Chicago in 1886, again rallying to the demand for the eight-hour day. But again the workers were rebuffed, this time with the aid of police provocation, frame-ups and hangings.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had a profound impact on the working class movement in the United States. Militant struggles during the Great Depression

built the industrial unions and laid the basis for the eight-hour day. Many of these, including the general strikes in San Francisco, Minneapolis and Toledo which erupted in 1934 and the Flint sit-down strike of in 1936–1937 were led by socialists—in the case of Minneapolis, American Trotskyists in the Communist League of America, a forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party.

The fight for the elementary interests of workers, such as decent and safe working conditions, job security and the reinstatement of the eight-hour workday requires that workers break with the UAW and form new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees in every factory and work site.

The tasks of such committees will require the development of a leadership in the working class based on an internationalist and socialist perspective in opposition to the nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the UAW.



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