

Outrage builds among autoworkers over 84-hour workweek for skilled trades workers at FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant

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12 October 2020

The news that Fiat Chrysler (FCA) management, with the support of the United Auto Workers (UAW), is implementing 12-hour days and seven-day workweeks for skilled trades workers at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit has touched a nerve among autoworkers across the US and Canada. Since it was published Friday night, the *World Socialist Web Site's* original article on the move has been read tens of thousands of times.

The 12-hour, seven-day work schedule, which was forced on skilled trades without a vote by the UAW, creates additional safety hazards on top of facilitating the further spread of the coronavirus in the plants. It negates the eight-hour day, one of the most cherished rights won in generations of struggle, which the UAW summarily abolished by imposing the Alternative Work Schedule (AWS). Skilled trades, as well as production workers, have already been working 10-hour shifts without payment of overtime after eight hours under the AWS.

The SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee issued a statement yesterday demanding the immediate rescinding of the move and a return to the eight-hour day. The statement explained: “The eight-hour day is not only for our own health and safety and to allow us to recover physically. It is also necessary so that we can live like human beings. We all have lives outside of the plant, which we will not abandon. ... We must take matters into our own hands again and organize ourselves.”

The situation at SHAP is far from unique. A skilled trades worker at FCA's Sterling Stamping plant, which is adjacent to SHAP, reports that skilled trades workers there are also being forced to work six days per week

because of delays installing new machinery. “I also know that there are more cases of COVID-19 here than what they are telling people. I thought this was supposed to be reported.”

Both the veil of silence by the company and the UAW, as well as the drive to reopen the economy by the Trump administration with the support of the Democratic Party, the worker said, are lulling some workers into a false sense of security over the spread of COVID-19. “They just had a guy out for coronavirus, but at his work area there is a community coffee pot, which workers drank from. I was like, ‘Are you out of your mind?’”

Gloria, a SHAP production worker (whose name has been changed to protect her identity), was pleased to hear that the reporting by the WSWs on the new work schedule is being widely read. She is opposed to the decision, as are thousands of other workers at the plant. “As it is now, workers do not have enough time to spend with their families. Chrysler is taking back everything and not compensating the workers at all. We are the ones who are losing here, not them.

“On top of that, the UAW is not backing the 7,000 employees who work at this plant and instead have gone along with what is being done. My feeling is that the entire situation at SHAP is out of control and I'm open to suggestions on how workers can change this. It is not something that is just taking place at our plant, workers at Ford are facing similar conditions.

“In my view, the companies are using the threat of unemployment as a weapon. They know that we are in a tough situation and have to pay bills and feel they can get away with just about anything. We are disposable and can be thrown out like scrap metal.”

The breakneck pace is creating dangerous conditions, she says. “As it is, in order to get to work on time, I need to leave my house two hours in advance because of backed-up traffic. Can you imagine what it’s going to be like with 24-hour operations? The parking lots will be full, there will be a growth in tensions and other problems.

“In addition to that, all the safety measures implemented following the coronavirus outbreak have been thrown out the window. Multiple people are getting sick. The other day, the company sent TPTs [temporary part-time workers], who have absolutely no rights, to work in an area where workers previously came down with the virus. The area was not properly cleaned and a number of full-time workers refused to go there. No real precautions are being taken.”

Another SHAP worker said: “Look, trades and hourly were looking forward to the eight-hour shifts, they [were thinking] about spending time with their loved ones. But like I have been telling them, it’s the 10th month of the year and Fiat Chrysler is saying that during the last three quarters they have lost money due to COVID-19, and they have people working around the clock for extra trucks. It just doesn’t add up.

“The rumor is that all Fiat Chrysler [skilled trades workers] will opt out of the union.” In fact, hundreds of skilled tradesmen already have signed a petition, addressed to UAW Vice President for Fiat Chrysler Cindy Estrada, threatening to withdraw their union dues if the new shifts take effect.

“I hope the rank-and-file committee succeeds. We have a scab union president [Rory Gamble] who will be retiring before the contract expires. As long as Fiat Chrysler is driving it will be hard to do anything.”

A skilled trades worker at SHAP said, “They are trying to divide and conquer,” by isolating SHAP workers from other autoworkers. “I tell the guys at other plants that if it’s coming to us, it’s coming to everybody.

“The [UAW International] skilled trades rep told us that he was on the committee that negotiated that. We couldn’t believe that. First of all why would you negotiate that and second of all, why would you be telling us you did it? Who would brag about that?

“You allowed that to get in the contract? Why not 15 hours? Why not 24 hours?

“Why would we even vote on it?

“In Kentucky and Tennessee, look at their working conditions. Are they better or are they worse? They are better. They are not working mandatory 12-hours in non-union states. Why are we paying union dues?”

Workers at FCA’s transmission complex in Kokomo, Indiana, also reacted. “Look at Sterling Heights, they are forcing skilled trades to work 12-hours shifts for straight time for seven days in a row, and then they get just a little time off,” said one. “People are worn out, and it poses a safety risk because workers are so tired.

“Some of them are refusing to pay union dues. That’s a way to show unity. AWS probably is a corrupt system because fine lines weren’t considered. People probably were misled. Unfortunately, this could happen at other plants, but people have to rise and block these types of things from happening.”

She responded enthusiastically to the suggestion that workers across FCA plants form lines of communication in a network of rank-and-file safety committees.

“I think people would do it. It’s bad enough about having to work in unsafe conditions, but to add longer mandated work hours with straight pay would be over the top. People already don’t have any confidence in the union anyway because they side with management.”



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