

Fiat Chrysler forced to abandon plans for 84-hour workweeks for skilled trades at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant

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In an embarrassing retreat, Fiat Chrysler (FCA) is abandoning plans to impose a grueling new Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) on skilled trades workers at its Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit. The reversal was reported by the *Detroit Free Press* in an article published Christmas Day.

The new schedule, known as “12/7,” would have seen skilled tradesmen at the plant work 12-hour days, seven days a week, followed by a week off. The brutal and unsafe new schedule was designed to minimize staffing issues caused by significant numbers of COVID-related vacancies, which the company has left unfilled, even as the plant has run at virtually full capacity during most of the pandemic.

Management was forced to abandon the move in the face of mass anger from autoworkers throughout the country. Significantly, workers took to the *World Socialist Web Site* to express their opposition in articles, which were widely circulated on social media and read tens of thousands of times. For the second time in a month, the *Free Press* was compelled to acknowledge the WSWs as a major force in the plants, noting that the WSWs had given extensive coverage to workers’ opposition to the grueling work schedule accepted by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

The *World Socialist Web Site* also published a statement by the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee, “Restore the eight-hour day! Stop the move to twelve-hour shifts for skilled trades workers at Michigan FCA plant!” The committee, which participates in the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Network with similar committees at plants throughout the country, was formed by plant workers over the summer in opposition to the unsafe return to work, carried out with the support of the UAW, during the coronavirus pandemic.

While opposition to the new work schedule was virtually guaranteed, FCA, which has long relied on the UAW to smother workers’ discontent, would never have retreated had this opposition not found an independent, organized and conscious form, principally through the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party and the growing number of rank-and-file committees, which the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* and the SEP have encouraged and helped to develop. In acknowledging the role of the WSWs, the *Free Press*, which has close ties to both the unions and the auto industry, is not only recognizing a clear fact, but sounding the alarm.

“Many of the skilled trades workers opposed the 12-hour workday, and it was important that the SHAP Rank-and-File Committee wrote on this,” one SHAP worker told the WSWs. “That article was very

widely read. Working a 12-hour shift would be extremely hard on the body. I am now trying to recover from a 10-hour shift and am just worn out. I’m still trying to get things done around my house before I have to go back on an 8-hour, 5-day shift.”

In response, the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee issued the following statement:

“We note with satisfaction management’s withdrawal of the 12/7 alternative work schedule for skilled trades. The proposed schedule was inhuman, forcing workers to spend entire weeks away from their families. Not even first responders have to deal with such grueling hours.”

“Every worker should ask themselves: Why did management make this decision? It was not out of concern for the welfare of autoworkers, whom they are deliberately allowing to become infected and die in the plants. Even less was it due to the United Auto Workers, who backed the move from the beginning. It was only the independent opposition of autoworkers themselves—not only skilled trades, but production workers and workers at plants throughout the country, who learned of the move on the World Socialist Web Site—which forced management to back down. As we said in our October 12 statement, the eight-hour day is a cherished right, which generations fought and died for. This helps to explain why workers, once they learned of the planned move, responded so powerfully.”

“Once again, autoworkers have proven that when they act collectively, independently of the union, they are more powerful than the corporate-UAW conspiracy. In March, a trans-Atlantic wildcat strike wave temporarily defeated management and the union’s attempts to keep plants operating and forced a two-month shutdown in the early phases of the pandemic. This action, which in the United States began here at Detroit-area FCA plants, including SHAP, saved untold numbers of lives.”

“But this is no reason for us to rest on our laurels. The fact remains that the companies and the UAW are still forcing workers to remain on the job during the most dangerous phase of the pandemic, even as vaccines for the coronavirus are beginning to be distributed.”

“Urgent action is needed by the working class to shut down the auto industry and all nonessential production and to guarantee wages by requisitioning the trillions of dollars made by the superrich and the corporations during the pandemic. Moreover, as with the reopening of plants in May, there can be no doubt that management will attempt to reimpose the 12/7 schedule as soon as they have regrouped.”

“To carry the fight forward means constructing a new alternative leadership, organized independent of the unions—that is, rank-and-

file safety committees. Contact us today to join our committee or for help setting up a committee at your plant."

The decision by FCA to temporarily scrap the plan is seen as an embarrassing retreat for the auto bosses, who have long relied on the UAW to impose whatever demands they have sought.

The right of autoworkers to be paid overtime after eight hours was won in the bitter 1941 strike at Ford. During the 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler by the Obama administration, the UAW agreed to the elimination of the hard-fought right. By 2012, the Alternative Work Schedule was in full use. Under the scheme, three "crews" labored four 10-hour days, including Saturdays without overtime pay, with some working back-to-back night and dayshifts. This sparked enormous anger among workers, who were exhausted and lost any family life.

The 2019 UAW-FCA contract allowed electricians, boiler repair, tool and die technicians and other skilled trades workers to work even longer shifts at FCA's "high-volume" plants. "Sterling Heights, or SHAP," the newspaper reported, "would be the first."

The agreement, signed by UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada, stated that "Alternative work schedules allow the company to increase competitiveness, provide greater job security for our employees, improve work-life balance and efficiently utilize assets."

Cindy Estrada, who had made no previous public statements about the 12/7 schedule, told the *Free Press* the measure was necessary to preserve jobs. "We don't want to have outside contractors coming in, doing the work that our skilled trades can do." She then attempted to play innocent saying, "Someone should be questioning [FCA] about work-life balance because that's a fight we're taking on. Why is it acceptable for them that our workers work seven days a week, 12 hours a day? Why? Because they don't want to hire more skilled trades because they'd rather do it at a lesser rate rather (than) hire more skilled trades."

This "job security" argument has been made by the UAW about virtually every concession for 40 years, even as the workforce in the American auto industry remains a fraction of the levels at midcentury. Aside from the fact that the 12/7 schedule was designed to *prevent* the need for FCA to hire new tradesmen, her reference to "outside contractors" is an insult to the intelligence of autoworkers, given the fact that it was Estrada herself who was instrumental in forcing through a secret deal to replace most of the regular workforce at GM's Lake Orion plant with low-paid contractors in 2018. The plant, which produces the Chevy Bolt and experimental autonomous vehicles, is intended as a test case for the company's future production methods.

Estrada then had the nerve to blame workers for accepting overtime. "And the workers, by the way, want all the overtime," she told the newspaper. "One way to fix overtime is workers turn it down." Estrada, who pulls in \$216,000 in union salary plus perks, failed to mention that the decades of wage cuts accepted by the UAW compel workers to accept overtime to support their families.

Marick Masters, a professor at Wayne State University, told the *Free Press* that better messaging was needed "both by the union and by the company" to convince workers that "it's in their best interests to go along with this type of a schedule." One major obstacle Masters pointed to was the discrediting of the union due to the federal corruption probe, which has produced more than a dozen indictments and was ended earlier this month. "You can't separate the fact that there's been a scandal brewing, and it's tainted the image of the union, and the rank and file have to be somewhat troubled by all

that's gone on."

The article noted that the imposition of the new schedule had prompted SHAP workers to begin circulating "a petition threatening the possibility some workers might withhold union dues."

While the new schedule, which was expected to be imposed in coming weeks, "is now off the table," the *Free Press* wrote, "the issue of a nontraditional schedule isn't dead." Kirsten Dzikczek, vice president of the industry-backed Center for Automotive Research, told the paper, "Having a lot of people out for COVID exposure is a challenge. To think of unique ways to getting back to where they were ... this has got to be part of that."

Meanwhile, the UAW is continuing to work with management to lie about the true extent of the pandemic in the plants. The union did not even publicly acknowledge the recent deaths due to COVID-19 of three Detroit-area autoworkers until reached for comment earlier this month by the *Free Press*. In that article, the newspaper also acknowledged that the deaths had first been reported in the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In a recent Associated Press article, UAW President Rory Gamble went even further than Ford executive Gary Johnson, who admitted in the same article that the test positivity rates in the factories are increasing. Gamble claimed, without evidence, that "nearly all" infections in the plants since late October were contracted outside of the plants and associated the danger of workers catching the virus in the factories to "misinformation," a term which the UAW has long used to refer obliquely to the WSWs.

This transparent lie, which the auto companies have publicly maintained for months, is not only meant to cover up the unsafe conditions in the plant. It also provides the means for the companies to deny workers compensation payments to infected autoworkers. The WSWs has confirmed at least one case where Sedgwick, FCA's third-party claims administrator, denied a workers comp claim by a worker who had been infected on the specious grounds that it was not a workplace injury because the worker had supposedly not contracted the virus in the plant.

The Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network is a national organization of workers throughout the auto industry who have organized to oppose the unsafe return to work by the auto companies and the United Auto Workers. Email the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org to learn more and get involved today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact