

With a 12-hour, seven-day schedule at Sterling Heights Assembly, UAW repudiates long battle for eight-hour day

Shannon Jones
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The drive by Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler) to impose a 12-hour, seven-day schedule for skilled trades at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) near Detroit, with the support of the United Auto Workers (UAW), has evoked broad anger. Workers rightly see the new schedule, set to begin on April 5, as a move to eliminate basic rights, such as the eight-hour day, won by workers in over a century of struggle.

The so-called Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) was first introduced in auto plants as part of the 2009 concessions imposed by the Obama administration in collaboration with the UAW during the forced bankruptcy and restructuring of the US auto industry. The new rules allowed shifts of longer than eight hours with no payment of overtime and the elimination of the traditional time-and-a-half rate for Saturday work.

As a result of this betrayal, Ford and Fiat Chrysler soon imposed 10-hour, four-day schedules at a number of plants. The new work schedule allowed the companies to squeeze out an additional 49 days of production annually, compared to the traditional plant schedules based on eight hours. This was because the AWS schedule enabled six days of production, without payment of overtime, as opposed to the traditional five-day workweek.

The new 12-hour day being imposed at SHAP takes the attack on the eight-hour day to a new level. Workers will be forced to work four unpaid overtime hours per shift and, on top of that, give up time-and-a-half for Saturday work, saving Stellantis millions of dollars in overtime payments. The UAW imposed the 12-hour option in the 2019 contract settlement, hiding the terms deep in the contract document.

The anger over this was expressed by a Ford skilled trades worker, who wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, saying, “Our leaders from decades ago fought and died for an 8-hour day, 40-hour workweek. All the companies are looking at it [because] it’s cheaper to pay overtime than to hire more people and give them

benefits.”

As the auto industry in the US has long served as a benchmark for wages and working conditions in other industries, the attack on the eight-hour day at SHAP has dire implications for all workers.

While the demand for the eight-hour day goes back as far as the 16th century, the modern eight-hour day movement dates to the Industrial Revolution in England.

In 1810, utopian socialist Robert Owen declared the eight-hour day at his New Lanark mill in Scotland. He later coined the slogan, “Eight hours’ labour, Eight hours’ recreation, Eight hours’ rest,” which became broadly popular. Later the Chartist movement in England took up the demand for a shorter workweek, and women and children won a 10-hour day in 1847.

In 1866, the International Workingmen’s Association, the First International founded by Karl Marx, advanced the eight-hour day as one of its chief demands. It adopted a resolution declaring, “A preliminary condition, without which all further attempts at improvement and emancipation must prove abortive, is the limitation of the working day.

“It is needed to restore the health and physical energies of the working class, that is, the great body of every nation, as well as to secure them the possibility of intellectual development, sociable intercourse, social and political action.

“We propose 8 hours work as the legal limit of the working day.”

In 1868, following the American Civil War, Congress passed eight-hour legislation for US government workers, although it was immediately undermined by the imposition of a 20 percent reduction in wages.

In subsequent years the eight-hour slogan gained broad popularity in the country, culminating in a mass demonstration in Chicago on May 1, 1886 under the slogan, “Eight-hour day with no cut in pay.” Nationwide more than 300,000 workers participated in strikes on May 1 in support

of the eight-hour demand.

On May 4 a rally in Chicago was called at Haymarket Square to protest the killing of two strikers one day earlier. Police attacked the peaceful rally. A bomb thrown by a provocateur resulted in a violent melee, and at least 67 were killed or injured, including police and workers. A witchhunt followed, ending with the hanging of four leading anarchists, later memorialized as the Haymarket Martyrs. May 1 was later established as an international workers day by the socialist Second International in 1889 in commemoration of this tragedy.

In 1890, when the US government first began tracking workers' hours, the average workweek in manufacturing was 100 hours. The grueling 16-hour workday was one of the grievances that sparked the 1894 Pullman strike that expanded into a national railroad strike, involving some quarter million workers and violent confrontations with police and soldiers.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the creation of the first workers state gave an enormous impetus to the fight of workers internationally, including in the United States.

During the 1919 Great Steel Strike, some 350,000 steelworkers across the US speaking a multitude of languages united around the demand for an eight-hour day and improvements in wages. In 1913, the average steelworker labored 66 hours a week under horrendous conditions, where death and injury were common. According to WSWS writer Tom Mackaman, "In the course of one year in a single South Chicago mill, 46 men died on the job, and another 386 were 'disabled permanently.'"

Employers backed by federal and state officials and the big business press launched a furious counterattack against the steel strikers. The strike was denounced as "an alien and subversive plot," and police and National Guard troops were sent in to smash picket lines and reopen the factories with scab labor. Company towns evicted the families of strikers and cut off credit, forcing workers to face hunger and cold.

The employers also used racial and ethnic antagonisms to try to split the strikers, a task facilitated by the fact that the reactionary American Federation of Labor for the most part barred membership to blacks and adopted a hostile attitude toward foreign-born workers. As a consequence, the Great Steel Strike was defeated, and workers were forced back into the mills on management's terms.

It was not until the mass industrial upsurge of the 1930s that the eight-hour day standard was encoded into US labor law and union contracts. This came in the wake of massive, semi-insurrectionary struggles in which workers took on and defeated the forces of the state, police, National Guard, company thugs, corporate media and unionbusting politicians, both Democrat and Republican.

The victory of such struggles as the Minneapolis general strike of 1934 and the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike required the initiative of socialists and revolutionary-minded workers and a rebellion against the right-wing, craft union dominated American Federation of Labor. At that time demands were raised within the UAW for a 30-hour workweek at 40 hours pay.

In 1940, the Fair Labor Standards Act set the standard workweek at 40 hours, requiring the payment of time-and-a-half for hours worker over 40. It also established the first minimum wage and banned child labor.

It was not until the 1941 strike at Ford that autoworkers won the right to overtime after eight hours. The struggle at Ford, again led by socialists and left-wing militants, united black and white workers against Henry Ford, an admirer of Hitler, and his notorious thugs headed by Harry Bennett.

Within this historical context, the attack on the eight-hour day at Sterling Heights Assembly must be seen as a repudiation of everything past generations fought to achieve. It will be used as the wedge to undermine and destroy whatever remains of any limits on the exploitation of workers by corporate owners.

The corporations are using the pandemic and the massive loss of life and economic crisis it has caused to accelerate the restructuring of their operations across the globe and introduce levels of exploitation not seen for generations. It is not possible to fight this without defending the achievements of the working class won through generations of sacrifice and class battles.

The UAW long forfeited any claim to the allegiance of autoworkers. The critical need is to draw the lessons of the past decades and build new workplace organizations, independent of the pro-company UAW, to mobilize the strength of workers in the US and across the globe to defend basic rights. We urge autoworkers determined to fight back against the UAW/company conspiracy to join and build the network of rank-and-file safety committees, including at SHAP, which has been initiated by the Socialist Equality Party and the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. Contact us today for information about participating.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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