

“Workers fought so hard to get these rights”

# Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly workers call for fight to defend the eight-hour day

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Opposition is growing among autoworkers against the move by Stellantis, in league with the United Auto Workers, to impose a 12-hour, seven-day work rotation for skilled trades at the giant Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) in the north Detroit suburbs.

Management has announced it plans to impose a new work schedule starting April 5 that would have four alternating skilled trades crews working seven-day, 12-hour shifts over a two-week rotation. The new mandatory schedule eliminates overtime pay after eight hours and time-and-one-half for Saturday work, fundamental gains workers won over more than a century of struggle.

The new schedule is being implemented under terms of the alternative work schedule (AWS) for skilled trades, language that was buried deep in the 2019 UAW-company contract and whose implications were never explained to workers. In addition, management has inserted provisions imposing the “team concept” on skilled trades, combining jobs and setting the stage for workforce reductions.

In recent days, SHAP skilled trades workers have reached out to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* to voice their opposition to the 12/7 schedule. They noted that the implementation of the new schedule takes place in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, under conditions where the UAW and management are suppressing information on workplace infections.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Sterling Heights Assembly Rank-and-File Safety Committee urge autoworkers to contact us with additional comments or information and to become active in the fight against the destruction of the eight-hour day. This blatant attack has dire implications for the entire working class, since autoworkers have historically served as a benchmark for pay and working conditions in other industries.

In an internal email thread made available to the *Autoworker Newsletter*, SHAP skilled trades workers voiced strong opposition to the 12/7 work schedule, with workers

denouncing local union officials for their collusion with management. One wrote, “It is a Damn shame that we can get answers about the AWS from a management member but can’t [get] any concrete answers from our Committeeman or Local Union President.”

Reference is also made to a recent cluster of COVID-19 infections among skilled trades workers. A worker reports that in the north body shop “three midnight electricians are out with possible Covid. Then another midnight electrician is out because of Covid. The door line, especially right doors is called Covid corner. Even their supervisor is out with it. What’s being done to keep us safe? Haven’t heard management confirm or deny about the recent ones.”

All attempts by skilled trades workers to lodge protests with the UAW International leadership, including Cindy Estrada, vice president for Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler), have been rebuffed.

A worker with knowledge of the discussions taking place among skilled trades workers, who we refer to as R. to protect his identity, said the following issues are posed in relation to the 12/7 schedule:

- No trust in the local and international UAW leadership. Fifteen people, including two former UAW presidents and the onetime lead labor negotiator for FCA, have been convicted in the federal corruption investigation. All contracts must be renegotiated.

- The imposition of a 12-hour work schedule in the midst of a pandemic is doubly wrong. Longer workdays when people are experiencing physical pain or sickness can be a real problem; the immune system will be weakened by extended work hours and resulting fatigue. Further, no consideration is being given for older workers, pregnant women or people with physical limitations.

- The very concept of the 12-hour day represents a major step back for workers' rights in the United States.

The worker further noted, "Twelve-hour days don't fit into most people's lives. Long shifts and workweeks would be physically draining and potentially dangerous. It would take days to recover after seven straight days at 12 hours. The schedule deprives workers of proper compensation for overtime and thus enforces a pay cut."

He further stated, "The AWS language directly violates the UAW Local 1700 (SHAP) contract, which states, 'In scheduling overtime, employees will not be required to work an unreasonable number of consecutive overtime hours.' With regards to daily overtime under the local agreement workers are not required to work more than 10 hours per day. Workers can be forced to only work one Sunday a month, no more."

He said that in addition to imposing a team concept on skilled trades workers that combines jobs, the new rules impose further restrictions on the job posting procedures outlined in the contract. It also changes language regarding canvassing for overtime hours.

R. also noted that break times under AWS violates "current language (046) Break Times and Lunch Periods—'employees are assigned regular lunch and break periods at specific times during the shift.' The new language gives management the 'discretion' to move your lunch daily and to reschedule it as late as 10 hours into the shift.

"In relation to training, the AWS adds language to (076) Skilled Trades—Training of Employees, but fails to address travel time pay and a requirement that management provide no less than one (1) week notice prior to scheduling of school when it is scheduled off-shift or off-site."

Another skilled trades worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "If you eliminate overtime on Saturday, that's a big thing. The next move will be to eliminate Sunday overtime. There is the chance that they could cut the hours. They already set a precedent under the new schedule where one week you work 36 hours. But under the terms of our contract the workweek is supposed to be 40 hours. If they can cut that to 36, why can't they do 32, or 24?"

He added, "The union gave FCA/Stellantis a blank check when they signed that contract without us knowing what it entailed. That was intentional. It shows what the union really stands for. They didn't want us to know. They only gave us the highlights. Everyone who asked for the full contract; they just kept putting them off. Everybody was asking where it was. But the union said, 'Oh, well nobody knows.' Then a day before [the vote] they gave us the highlights."

Another skilled trades worker said, "People are retiring or looking for another job. It is like a concentration camp. Workers fought so hard to get the eight-hour workday and

the 40-hour workweek. People don't understand their history, the rights that have been given away. Workers need to know about their history, what went into gaining these rights that are now going down the drain."

"We want to save the eight-hour day. If we don't stop this it will spread to other plants. We should put a spotlight on this issue. I notice that the *Free Press* took an article from you last year, but they didn't initiate the effort," he said referring to a report last December on Fiat Chrysler's initial attempt to impose the 12/7 schedule that referenced the WSWS. The *Free Press* at the time falsely reported that the AWS had been shelved. In fact, following the completion of the merger between Fiat Chrysler and PSA Group in January the new Stellantis moved forward with plans for the 12/7 schedule.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *Autoworker Newsletter* call on all workers to come to the defense of SHAP workers against the imposition of industrial slavery. As the pandemic has demonstrated, when it comes to the pursuit of profits, the corporations have no regard for the health and safety of workers. The fight to protect workers' lives from COVID-19, including the shutdown of nonessential production with the provision of full income to workers, is not separate from the fight to defend the eight-hour day and basic work protections. These rights will not be defended by the UAW, but will only be secured through independent organization and action by workers in a rebellion against the corrupt, pro-company unions.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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