

Autoworkers speak out against 84-hour workweek for skilled trades at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant: “It seems like torture”

Tom Hall
7 April 2021

This week, Stellantis began its Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) for skilled tradespeople at its Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit. This brutal schedule, also known as 12/7, entails 12-hour workdays for seven days straight with no overtime pay, followed by seven days off.

The AWS at the plant is the first of its kind for skilled trades in the auto industry, made possible through concessions granted to the company by the United Auto Workers union in the 2019 contract. It represents a further attack on the eight-hour day in the auto industry, which had already been substantially eroded when the UAW agreed to allow AWS for production workers a decade ago.

The new schedule creates an inherently dangerous situation by physically exhausting skilled tradespeople who occupy critical positions within the plant. The system also introduces the so-called “team concept,” forcing workers to perform tasks for which they are not qualified.

This is all the more reckless given the massive spread of new variants of COVID-19 throughout the state of Michigan. Sterling Stamping Plant, which is located across the street from SHAP, recorded its highest one-month total number of infections ever last month. No such figures exist at SHAP, as a result of a UAW-management cover-up of infections at nearly every plant in the country, but workers in the factory have reported an increase in positive cases and workers near their stations being placed under quarantine.

Inside the plant, anger is simmering among both skilled trades and production workers. For months, the plant has been working continuous forced overtime, with production employees working six- and even seven-day workweeks. The auto giant is desperate to make up for lost profits due to both the pandemic and the global semiconductor shortage by keeping the plant, which produces the highly profitable and best-selling Ram pickup truck, running as hard as possible.

The SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee—organized by workers last year independently of the UAW—is seeking to mobilize opposition throughout the auto industry to the brutal work schedule and unsafe conditions. Last month, the committee issued a statement demanding “the rescinding of the 12/7 schedule and the reinstatement of the principle of the eight-hour day for all workers, the payment of time and one-half after eight hours and for Saturday work.”

“They are short with people, but they are running any way,” one skilled trades worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. “People are in training and working at the same time. This is crazy.”

“[The overtime is] overbearing for people as human beings,” a production worker said. “I do overnight. I am on C crew. It’s really hectic when we have to do six days but that is usually volunteer-only. But to do it every week for seven days, I don’t know, it seems like torture. We feel like we are rats in a lab.

“I don’t understand the purpose for this schedule. I feel like it’s unnecessary. The UAW I feel could potentially be a really strong force. But they don’t really acknowledge the workers. The higher ups get the best end of the stick. We basically generate most of the money going up to them. They make a lot of decisions without our consent. Our voices are not heard.

“If the trucks are rolling off the line, and nothing is wrong with the product, how is our overtime related to the production of the trucks? There is no problem with the truck we make. The Ram is still the highest selling truck. They say demand is high, but two or three Saturdays a month should cover that. Who is even buying the trucks? This is the type of conversation we have on the line.”

While SHAP continues to run full blast, the company has been forced to eliminate production at other plants. Stellantis’ brand-new Mack Avenue plant is reportedly on

short shifts due to chip shortages, and Warren Truck Assembly Plant has been taken offline for three weeks, with temporary workers from the plant shifted northward to SHAP. According to unconfirmed reports from workers, the shutdown at Warren Truck has recently been extended to six weeks.

“This will trickle down,” a production worker at SHAP said. “As long as we allow them to impose this on skilled trades, it’s just a matter of time before it comes down to all production workers. It will happen eventually.”

The UAW, he continued, “do what the corporation wants. No one likes it. But the union is just allowing it. People are not trusting them anymore. When they get behind closed doors with the company, they will do anything against us.”

Autoworkers live under constant threat from both management and the union, he said. “No one wants to start over again. We need our jobs. If one of us steps forward, they have a target on their back. The union is putting that fear out there. Anyone who speaks up will be made an example of. They use fear and intimidation. That’s not how it used to be.”

The situation at SHAP is being followed closely by workers at other plants, mainly through social media, because they understand it as a spearhead for a broader offensive by the company. Michelle, a worker from Stellantis’ Toledo Jeep plant, said, “What Stellantis is doing to the skilled tradesmen is only the beginning. At some point, they will try and impose this type of schedule on all the workers. The worst thing about this is that the union has allowed it to take place. As far as I’m concerned, it is the clearest indication yet that these officials do not speak for the members but are a part of management.

“Making workers come in seven days a week and 12 hours a day will put them into an early grave and perhaps that’s the intent. That way the company doesn’t have to meet its pension obligations or pay for health care once we’ve retired.

“At Toledo Jeep right now they are giving workers an option to work 40-, 50- or 60-hour shifts without overtime pay and optional days off. For those of us who have families, it’s a real bummer. When do you spend time with your kids, go to a doctor’s appointment or just relax? I definitely feel that something needs to be done about this.”

A Stellantis worker from Indiana said, “It’s just a matter of time before they force this schedule on all Stellantis workers. If the UAW won’t support the skilled trades for this awful schedule now, most likely they won’t support us if it trickles down to the unskilled workers. It’s just a matter of time.

“I think this whole situation is just awful! This will affect marriages, family time and cause more health concerns.

People will get sick. People will be getting fired or end up quitting. Workers will be made to choose between money or family. People want to go to their kids’ concerts, games and recitals. There won’t be any quality of life. Not to mention, there are workers that have to care for elderly or sick parents.

“I wonder what perks the union is getting for siding with management this time. I know they are getting some type of piece of a pie at our expense.” She concluded, “We have to get prepared, and be ready to fight for better working conditions and schedules. I think there needs to be a strike.”

A parts worker and supporter of the rank-and-file safety committee of Faurecia Gladstone workers in Columbus, Indiana, expressed his solidarity with SHAP workers, saying: “The working class has come too far to allow the capitalists at Stellantis, or any other corporation, or even the government, to impose 12/7. That doesn’t give anybody time for their family. That doesn’t give anybody time to do the things that they need to do to live.

“I think what they are doing is barbaric. It is murderous. When it comes to 12-hour days, people are working themselves to death. That is not right to take somebody’s life like that just for their profits.

“They have a set-up at Gladstone where it is pretty much the same. It’s for 11-and-a-half hours a day. But with this shortage of parts they keep you as long as they can, then without warning they tell you to go home.

“All the working class is fighting for the same thing. Money is God to the capitalists. They don’t care whose lives they take, who they run over, as long as they get that profit.

“Giving that \$4 trillion in the Cares Act to the billionaires was wrong because all that was personal profit for them. They are not putting themselves on the line. They are not even close to the front lines where they can be contaminated and killed. But yet they expect the working class, the teachers, the miners, the autoworkers, everybody to do this for them.

“The only way we are going to be able to stop the pandemic profiteers is to have a general strike throughout the world. We are done with the greediness that has killed 3 million people.”

To learn more about getting involved with the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee, sign up today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)