

Tensions rise as Sterling Heights Assembly Plant workers begin ninety consecutive days at work

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24 September 2021

Workers at Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit begin 90 consecutive days of work today, under a “critical plant” status invoked by management. The status is provocatively set to end on December 24, Christmas Eve.

The right by management to invoke “critical status” was part of the 2019 sellout contract negotiated by the United Auto Workers with Stellantis, then known as Fiat Chrysler. Buried in a 500 page supplemental volume of side agreements and “memoranda of understanding” is contract language which allows the company, without even needing the fig leaf of the union's approval, to invoke “critical status” for any reason at any of its facilities, allowing them to ignore restrictions on overtime and force plant workers to work seven days a week.

Outrage continues to grow among SHAP workers towards the UAW and Local 1700, who are conspiring with management to enforce working conditions which increasingly resemble those from a century ago, before the industrial unions were founded.

“Under the critical status, I think you may get one day off after 30 days,” one skilled tradesman told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. “Other than that, you can't take PTO or vacation, you can only get out of work by using FMLA (Family Medical Leave).”

The tradesman said they have not yet been informed by the union how the critical status will affect skilled trades, who were already working 84 hour workweeks, with seven days on followed by seven days off, for most of the year. This is the first time that a so-called “Alternative Work Schedule” has been imposed upon skilled tradesmen at a major assembly plant in the United States. The tradesman, however, believed critical status will impact them as well in some form.

At the same time, plant management has already been forced to cancel two out of three shifts this Sunday due to the chronic global parts shortage. One worker reports that the company has been stockpiling thousands of uncompleted vehicles missing instrument panels, radios and other components.

Another production worker reported, “A and B shift have been sent home every day after one hour of working this week. This also means that Saturday is straight time for them. I think

the company deliberately set this up to not pay them time and half.”

However, the difficulty in procuring parts shows that Stellantis is extremely vulnerable to any interruption in production, showing that SHAP workers are in a powerful position. Throughout the pandemic and the global parts shortage, Stellantis has determined to maintain production at all costs at SHAP, which makes the bestselling and highly profitable Ram 1500. It has idled production at other plants throughout the year in order to shift not only microchips, but even temporary workers to the plant, in order to maintain production at as high of a level as possible.

The prioritization of the most profitable plants has been key to Stellantis' massive earnings, totaling \$8 billion in the first half of this year alone, in spite of an industry-wide collapse in new vehicle sales.

SHAP workers demonstrated their courage and determination last year when they defied a union-brokered agreement to keep the plant running during the initial surge of the pandemic, carrying out a wildcat strike which quickly spread to other facilities and forced the industry to shut down for two months.

Today, there is great potential for a renewed struggle uniting SHAP and other Big 3 workers, along with John Deere workers whose contract expires next month, with Dana auto parts workers, who occupy a critical choke point in the global supply chain. Dana workers voted down a sellout contract brought forward by the UAW and the United Steelworkers earlier this month by a nine-to-one margin and are determined to fight against sweatshop conditions, such as endless seven-day workweeks, which are now being brought into the assembly plants.

This requires a struggle not only against management but the corrupt trade unions, which are deliberately keeping Dana workers on the job for at least the next three weeks by drawing out bogus “negotiations” at a time when Dana workers are in the strongest position as the company struggles to complete its critical changeover to producing parts for next year's models. To fight this sabotage and to appeal for support from other auto workers, Dana workers have formed the Dana Workers Rank-

and-File Committee. SHAP workers and workers at the other assembly plants have an obligation to support the Dana workers and appeal for the broadest possible unity.

"I was in the plant during the walkouts last March," one production worker at SHAP told the WSWS. "At the time, we didn't know much about what this thing was (COVID), and they weren't taking it seriously. And we were mad. People were just sitting down along the line refusing to work.

"I got COVID later on. They were pressuring me to say that I hadn't been in close contact enough with anyone to expose them. They didn't even tell anyone on my team that I had COVID, I had to tell them myself. Earlier in the year they had hundreds out on quarantine, but should have been even more, because they were covering a lot of it up."

"The critical status is really 95 days, since critical status starts on Saturday," he continued. "That means we'll have already worked 5 days that week before the 90 days starts.

"People with kids are going to have to scramble to find people to watch them over the weekend. How are they going to figure this out?"

"The atmosphere in the plant is horrible. They don't even have enough parts, but they are going to work us seven days a week. Everything is stretched to the limit. Since they're running 24/7 now, I don't know how they do maintenance. Maybe they don't. They had the AGVs (automated guided vehicles) break down in one side of the plant the other day, and supervisors were swarming there to move them by hand. They aren't even supposed to be doing that work."

In another indication of the increasing disrepair of the plant, workers report that the main walkway into the building has been flooded. Instead of fixing it, management has set up a steel gate in front of the walkway and are making workers walk around the yard to get inside instead.

"To be honest, I haven't even seen [Local 1700 president] Louis Pahl since he entered office," the production worker continued. "He doesn't show up in the plant...They had a four-and-a-half hour Zoom session last week for the local meeting. I wasn't there, but people were saying it was just them beating around the bush and lying."

"The UAW are all criminals. They don't represent the workers," the skilled trades worker said. "Our plant is only 15 miles or so away from Solidarity House. Yet during the 2019 contract vote, Cindy Estrada [UAW Vice President for Stellantis] refused to even come up to us to talk to us about the contract.

"FCA/Stellantis admitted to bribing the union in court, they were fined, and yet we are still beholden to the contract... They claim the contract was negotiated in about week. Now, you can't even *read* the entire contract in a week, much less negotiate all of the points in it. This shows they were not bargaining in good faith. We got nothing out of it but a pay cut and worse working conditions. And they offered a signing bonus during the vote, which took place around Christmas time,

in order to deceive us.

"There is an unsigned letter to Cindy Estrada and the UAW which is being circulated, written by the wife of one of the tradesmen here, who explains what a terrible impact the new 12/7 schedule for skilled trades has had on their family. Their only response was, 'find out who wrote this.' She obviously didn't sign her name because she was afraid of retaliation.

"Everything that letter spelled out was true. But one thing it doesn't go into, which is also important, is the loss of overtime pay. Some people are losing tens of thousands of dollars in overtime due to the new schedule. My wife has had to pick up extra work to make ends meet. It's been a struggle."

"The new schedule has been detrimental. Some younger, single guys get along okay with it, but if you have a wife, a family, even a dog, it becomes impossible. But there has also been a real influx here of new tradesmen, people for whom this the first taste of working in a union shop. There is a lot of frustration among them, they think the union is useless.

"There's a whole coverup going on. Even sympathetic reporters in the local press don't report on us, because the auto companies are big advertisers for the media. Even the UAW's own website hasn't posted anything about John Deere, or Dana, or anything.

"We have the hottest product on the market at our plant right now, the Ram 1500. This is the time to fight for better conditions.

"I watched one of the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee statements which the WSWS had read out in a video. That was very good, it is getting around in SHAP. It prompted me to do more research into this. It's incredible how they're dragging their heels at Dana. We need to reach to people at Dana, at John Deere."



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