

USA: New Eight-Hour Day Fight Erupts in Auto

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Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit has just adopted a schedule that evades overtime pay and ruins weekends. In two stamping plants nearby, workers are pushing their union to resist

Workers at Chrysler's Warren Stamping Plant in Michigan thought their worst concessions were over, but then local union leaders dropped a leaflet: the dreaded Flexible Operating Pattern (FOP) was coming.

This type of work schedule does two things: it allows the company to get more production from its workers with less overtime pay, and it disrupts people's lives. To say the proposed changes are widely unpopular would be a huge understatement.

The "3-2-120" schedule means three crews, two shifts, and 120 total hours. Essentially it's a cheaper way for the company to get 120 hours of production each week, compared to having two shifts each work 60 hours (with 20 hours of that paid at time-and-a-half) or scheduling three back-to-back eight-hour shifts working 40 hours.

In the 3-2-120, the A crew works 10 hours on day shift Monday through Thursday, say 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The B crew works 10 hours evening shift Wednesday through Saturday, 6 p.m. to 4:30 a.m. The C crew works 10 hours evening shift Monday and Tuesday and 10 hours day shift Friday and Saturday.

WORK EVERY SATURDAY

This means two out of three crews are working 10 hours every Saturday—at straight time. Detroit 3 auto workers used to be paid time-and-a-half for any hours over eight per day or on Saturday. That was lost in the 2009 bankruptcy contracts.

Equally important to the company, going from three eight-hour shifts to two ten-hour shifts actually reduces paid break time.

Workers in a round-the-clock operation are paid for eight hours a day even though part of each day is their lunch break. But 10-hour workers, in the plant from 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., aren't paid for their half-hour lunch. At Warren Stamping, the change would mean at least 225 minutes more production per week. This is 21st century speed-up.

Union leaders mentioned a possible alternative: the 6-2-120. That eliminates the C crew's having to work two different shifts, but has everyone working two out of three Saturdays, 10 hours for straight time. Both plans would be horribly disruptive to workers' lives.

DISCONTENT

Shop floor union members reacted quickly, with people from all over the plant stepping up and expressing their discontent. They distributed a leaflet titled “Why We Are Against Flexible Operating Patterns.” A petition got 400-plus signatures.

What fuels this discontent is the knowledge that the company doesn’t need to impose the “flexible operating pattern” to get more parts. This is about pure corporate greed and the company getting more production on the cheap.

The Warren workers stamp out body parts from sheet metal and build doors, hoods, floor pans, and subassemblies that are shipped to assembly plants.

“They are justifying this by saying that they need more production out of their last two remaining stamping plants,” said Martha Grevatt, a skilled trades worker who transferred from Chrysler’s now demolished stamping plant in Ohio. “Now, by taking away the weekends, they want to turn our lives upside down to improve their bottom line.”

A grandmother caring for a special-needs child sent an eloquent text to her union rep about the hardships the new program would cause. Working parents are worried about finding childcare to cover the gaps created by this callous schedule. Workers caring for elderly parents wonder how they will manage. The negative effects on workers’ health and well-being would be immense.

The leaflet and petition led up to a raucous union meeting where local leaders attempted to placate the rank and file. They tried to walk the tightrope of selling the program while telling the membership they were against it—and claiming the decision was out of their hands.

They didn’t pull it off. It was easy to see their strategy will be to offer a false choice between two equally bad schedules.

Grevatt spoke at the union meeting. “I unexpectedly got choked up and became teary-eyed when I reminded the leadership that people died for the eight-hour day,” she said, “that November 11 was the 125th anniversary of the hanging of the Haymarket martyrs.

“Workers I had never met came up to me and hugged me the next day.”

THE EIGHT-HOUR-DAY TEAM

After presenting the 400-plus signatures at the union meeting, workers met to discuss the next step. One idea was to co-opt management’s bogus “team” language: workers are building a network of “eight-hour-day union team leaders” who will be responsible for communicating action plans.

The immediate next step will be weekly “Texting Tuesdays” and “Phoning Fridays” where workers text, email, and call the company and the UAW International—which by contract must give its approval for an FOP to be imposed—to let them know they want to preserve the weekend and the eight-hour day.

The eight-hour-day union team also plans to reach out to workers in other plants where the FOP is already or will be implemented. The message is clear: preserve the eight-hour day, preserve the weekend, drop the FOP!

Such schedules have been used at Ford and GM and are in effect at several Chrysler plants in the Detroit area, and under discussion at others. At a stamping plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan, the proposal caused a boisterous five-hour union meeting.

Lashawn English, recording secretary of United Auto Workers Local 1264, said 400 of the local's 1,700 members came to the meeting. Officers are now researching how the FOP has worked—or not worked—at other plants. While allowing that all schedules have pros and cons, English said that at Sterling Stamping, “no one really wants it.

“The UAW created the 40-hour, five-day work week,” she said, “and that’s what they think it should be built on.

Alex Wassell

SCHEDULES FROM HELL

“The Labor Movement: The Folks Who Brought You the Weekend,” crow's a popular bumper sticker. It's true: the fight for a decent work week propelled some of American labor's most celebrated struggles. The Haymarket martyrs were hanged in Chicago 125 years ago because of a fight for the eight-hour day. The wave of industrial organizing in the 1930s crystallized the 40-hour work week with legislation guaranteeing overtime pay.

But too many of us can't count on those basics anymore, after three decades of employer onslaught. This month, Labor Notes highlights three struggles for humane work schedules. Auto workers are trapped in a Groundhog Day scenario, fighting to win the eight-hour day all over again. Laundry workers had to teach their boss the meaning of the word “weekend.” And retail workers wish they could get anywhere near 40 hours a week.

P.S.

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* Alex Wassell is a welder repair technician at Warren Stamping and a member of UAW Local 869.