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The answer to job-killing automation: shorten the workweek!

written by Stephen Millies
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The United Auto Workers (UAW) are taking on three of the biggest corporations on the planet: Ford, General Motors and Stellantis (Chrysler). These outfits had total sales last year of a half-trillion dollars.

That's as large as the combined Gross Domestic Product of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, and Venezuela. Three hundred forty-seven million people live in these five countries.

The UAW members are fighting for all of us. Auto workers are rebelling against 45 years of plant closings, givebacks, and wage cuts.

Instead of equal pay for equal work, [newly hired temp workers](#) are paid \$16.67 per hour. Adjusted for inflation, [that's worth \\$1.90](#) in 1968 money — just 30 cents above the minimum wage that year.

Back in 1970, 321,000 UAW members in the United States struck General Motors for 67 days. Another 21,000 workers, now represented by Unifor, struck GM plants in Canada for 94 days.

They won big wage increases, retirement after 30 years on the job ("30 and out"), and larger pensions. The UAW contract became a goal for millions of other workers who also made gains.

The wealthy and powerful spent decades counterattacking. Capitalism's biggest weapon was plant closings.

Just on the East Coast, GM plants in Baltimore; Linden, New Jersey (near Newark); Terrytown, New York (a New York City suburb); and Framingham, Massachusetts (near Boston) were shut down. Two plants were closed in Cleveland, and so were Detroit's Cadillac factory and the Van Nuys plant in Los Angeles.

Today, the UAW represents 150,000 GM workers. That's 170,000 jobs that were

wiped out.

At least as many jobs were destroyed at Ford and Chrysler. The Black-majority cities of Detroit and Flint, Michigan, were the heaviest hit — GM shut down nine of its 10 plants in Flint, where the historic 1937 sit-down strike occurred.

In 1980, before these layoffs, young workers in [Flint, Michigan](#) had higher average incomes than those in San Francisco. Thirty-seven years later, in 2017, [half of Flint's population](#) lived in poverty.

To save a few million dollars, children were poisoned by filthy water pumped from the polluted Flint River instead of using water from the Great Lakes.

Overworked while millions are unemployed

Automation is one of the biggest job killers. Robots replaced spot welders and other workers on the assembly line. Computers swept away office jobs.

One of the UAW's demands is a 32-hour work week to keep and create jobs. Technology should be used to make people's lives better, not to increase joblessness and misery.

It's outrageous that some people are forced to work overtime while 6.4 million people were unemployed in August. Another [5.4 million](#) currently want a job but are not even counted as belonging to the labor force.

"The condemnation of one part of the working class to enforced idleness by the overwork of the other part, and the converse, becomes a means of enriching the individual capitalists." That's what Karl Marx — the founder of scientific socialism, also called communism — [wrote in "Capital"](#) in 1867.

For 200 years, the world labor movement has fought for shorter hours of work.

British workers struggled first for a 12-hour workday and then for 10 hours on the job.

On May 1, 1886, workers across the United States went on strike for an 8-hour workday. In retaliation, capitalist courts hanged the “Haymarket Martyrs” — George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Albert Parsons, and August Spies — in Chicago on Nov. 11, 1887.

Fifty-six years before, on Nov. 11, 1831, slave masters hanged the freedom fighter Nat Turner. He led a glorious insurrection of enslaved Africans who worked from “no see” in the morning to “no see” at night.

One of the demands of the 1919 steel strike of 365,000 workers, led by future communist leader William Z. Foster, was for an eight-hour workday. The steel tycoons claimed they couldn’t operate their mills without 12-hour shifts.

Although police and private gunmen broke the strike, U.S. Steel president Elbert Gary was compelled to institute an 8-hour workday in the early 1920s. Smaller steel outfits soon followed.

It was the working-class upsurge of the 1930s that established a 40-hour workweek. The labor movement was responsible for the weekend.

Shorter hours mean more jobs

Even after the 40-hour workweek was won, many workers still spend at least 50 hours on their job. That’s because it takes millions of workers at least an hour to travel to and from their job.

Workers should be compensated from the time they leave their homes to go to work. Compulsory overtime should be prohibited.

Unions helped [end most child labor](#) in the 1930s. As the legendary IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) leader “Big Bill” Haywood wrote, “the worst thief is he who steals the playtime of children.”

Capitalists and their politicians are bringing back this atrocity. It was legal for 16-year-old Michael Schuls to be working in a [Wisconsin sawmill](#) when he was killed on June 29. Teenagers have been found working in [Alabama auto part factories](#).

[Steven Rattner](#), who helped push through the cutbacks for auto workers during the 2008 economic crisis, thinks the UAW is “asking for too much: In addition to pay raises of 36 percent over four years, the list includes a 32-hour workweek with 40 hours of pay.”

Well, sir, do you know that 90 years ago, the U.S. Senate passed a law for a 30-hour workweek by a vote of 53 to 30 on April 5, 1933? Alabama Senator and future Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black introduced the bill. (“A Terrible Anger, The Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco,” by David F. Selvin.)

This legislation was later ditched in Congress, but it shows what can be demanded. Millions of jobs could be created by instituting a 32-hour workweek, as the UAW is asking for.

The billionaire class can afford it. As UAW vice president Mike Booth pointed out, GM alone raked in \$100 billion in profits over the past decade from its North American operations. Twenty-one billion was spent on stock buybacks that only [benefit Wall Street](#) speculators.

With today’s technology, demanding a 32-hour workweek is no more impossible than marching for the 8-hour day on May Day in 1886.

