

Midwest Workers Speak:

The Employee Case for Flexibility in Manufacturing Jobs



April 2011

*The National Partnership
for Women & Families
and Family Values @
Work interviewed twelve
manufacturing industry
workers in Chicago and
Milwaukee, including
workers employed directly
by a manufacturing
company and workers
hired by temp agencies
and placed in
manufacturing jobs.
This short report provides
a snapshot of the
challenges these workers
face and the kinds of
flexibility they most value.*



Introduction

Manufacturing industry workers are struggling with job and financial insecurity. Few have access to the basic flexible workplace policies they need to manage their responsibilities at home and on the job. Too often, “flexibility” means outsourcing jobs to temporary workers who perform exactly the same tasks as permanent workers at much lower wages—without benefits or job security, and with unpredictable shifts and hours. “Flexibility” can also mean asking workers who have survived layoffs to produce the same volume with fewer resources. Many manufacturing workers experience rigid schedules with little consideration for personal or family caregiving responsibilities. These workers often risk discipline or job loss if they take time off when personal or family illness strikes.

The few workers who do have family-flexible workplace policies say that real flexibility enhances productivity and promotes workers’ well-being and loyalty. While these workers recognize that manufacturing processes must meet production demands, they say the government and businesses need to do a better job of providing decent employment and workplace protections for all workers.

Workers’ Key Challenge #1:

Dealing with workplace pressures in an industry that is increasingly characterized by outsourcing, corporate takeovers and layoffs.

Manufacturing workers take pride in their skills but say that employers increasingly disregard expertise in the name of reduced labor costs. Nearly all of those interviewed who are employed directly by a manufacturing company (“permanent workers”) mentioned layoffs, corporate takeovers or outsourcing to temp agencies as sources of stress and insecurity. They described feeling ever-growing pressure to work harder. “They’re trying to get the same type of production out of four guys [where there used to be six],” a metal processor explained.



Interviewees included:

Temporary workers at a large food manufacturer, a magazine factory, a computer parts manufacturer and a retail distributor

An industrial maintenance mechanic at a large agricultural firm

A scrap metal worker

An assembly line worker at a tortilla factory

A computer parts quality-control worker

A metal processor at an appliance manufacturing company

An account manager for a truck part manufacturer

WORKERS' CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES SPAN GENERATIONS.

Interviewees included:

A mother of three who will soon have to care for her parents

A man in his mid-50s who suffered a brain aneurysm

A 64-year-old assembler who shares caregiving responsibilities for her grandchildren

A 32-year-old father of a young daughter with a terminal illness

A 47-year-old man caring for his 90-year-old father

Married and single parents caring for young children

Nearly all workers recognize manufacturing companies' increased reliance on temporary workers—which makes both permanent and temporary workers feel insecure. For permanent workers, the trend toward hiring temps promotes fear. One computer parts worker with five years' tenure expressed hesitation to ask for any flexibility. "If you want a job, you have to work. There are other people who want the job as much as you." A scrap metal worker noted that increased temp hiring makes all workers feel under-valued. "You're just another worker to them—you're dispensable."

"There is no job stability now because most companies are using temp agencies...You save a lot of money when you use a temp service and then you don't hold the responsibility to [the workers]."

— Chicago Production Worker

Temporary workers voice strong feelings of inequity and instability. Many of the temps interviewed explained that they are paid as little as half the hourly rate and lack the benefits offered to permanent workers. A snack factory production worker said, "We do everything [permanent workers] do but they get paid more, get sick days and holidays. We're stuck...hoping we'll be put to work the next night."

Temps are particularly vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of business, so "flexibility" often means being told they are not needed for days or weeks at a time. A magazine factory worker in the same temp assignment for two and a half years explained, "I'll be off maybe three weeks, then work for two months, then they'll lay me off for a week or two." "Flexibility" can also mean being paid by the piece—and waiting on the job without pay for hours before a truck comes in to unload.

At the same time, temps are most susceptible to retribution for being unavailable for even part of a day. "They write you up or don't ask you to come back" for asking to come in late or leave early, a magazine factory worker explained. A worker who took a week off when his 79-year-old father had a stroke said he was essentially blacklisted from his temp agency for several days after he was ready to return.

Workers' Key Challenge #2:

Risking workplace discipline and job loss for needing even the most basic forms of flexibility to meet personal needs and family caregiving demands.

Most workers, whether permanent or temporary, lack control over their schedules. Several workers describe formal discipline and informal disapproval as common responses to arriving even a few minutes late. A metal processor said that workers at his company receive two disciplinary points for being even five minutes late. Between childcare emergencies and traffic during his hour-long commute, he accrues enough points every year to put him at risk for termination—a source of significant stress. For temporary workers, arriving late can mean no day's work at all or, worse, not being called to temp at that worksite again.

Temporary workers also face uncertainty about whether they will be asked to work and the length of their shifts, but they must be available at the worksite to find out, often incurring unnecessary transportation and childcare expenses. A temporary magazine factory worker, like others interviewed, described reporting for work only to be told she is not needed—after she's already paid for childcare and commuter bus fare. "If they send me home, more money is coming out of my pocket than coming in," she explained. Changes in shift and hours are hard. "I have two kids I have to make time for. [When my schedule changes], I have to drop what I'm doing to go make some money to make our lives better."

Long shift hours, including mandatory overtime, are the norm for many workers and put a significant strain on workers and their families. An electrical assembler explained that she routinely works ten-hour days plus six or eight hours

on Saturday: “I don’t think you can do as great a job if you’re [not] rested...I’m 64, but people get tired no matter how old they are,” she said. For workers with young children, long hours are particularly problematic. A metal processor explained, “There are times you have to stay [so long] that when you come home...you can’t do anything with your family.” On days that he is required to work from 4 a.m. to 4 p.m., he described having to get up by 2:30 a.m. and not getting home until after 5 p.m. “It puts a real stress on the house,” he said.

Arranging childcare can present significant challenges. For example, a food warehouse worker who works the third shift relies heavily on her mother to stay with her five-year-old son overnight. “I get up and get him ready for school...sleep while he’s at school, from 8 to 2.” Others described tag-teaming with a spouse they rarely see.

Because of production demands, mandatory overtime is common. Many permanent and temporary workers believe they cannot turn down overtime without repercussions. A temporary production worker for a large retailer explained that when a truck comes in and needs to be unloaded, “We’re not given any choice—either you do it or you don’t come back.” Even those who technically have a choice feel hamstrung: “Who would turn it down? If I said ‘no’...people know you have other priorities,” remarked a computer parts manufacturing worker. Conversely, one worker said she would prefer to work fewer hours, but anything less than full time is not an option. “I go along because it’s the only way I can pay my bills,” she explained.

The few workers who have more control over their schedules value the accompanying security—and believe the company benefits by offering real flexibility to workers. A temporary magazine factory worker said she is grateful she can refuse overtime and still be asked back the next day. A former computer parts assembly worker explained that, at the company where she temped, “If you had a doctor’s appointment in the morning...you could make up the hours...so you won’t lose pay.” An industrial mechanic said his company lets parents adjust their start time and he believes the policy benefits both workers and the business.

Flexible scheduling is “a plus for the company because the company is going to get more production out of you than if you’re stressed. It’s a little give and take.”

— Milwaukee Industrial Mechanic

In a climate where insecurity reigns supreme, workers feel stuck when they get sick. Very few have paid sick time, and many have faced questions from supervisors when asking for unpaid time off. A worker who packages snack foods explained, “A lot of people...come in sick because we have to pay the rent and we have kids to take care of.” A scrap metal worker recounted that she has come to work sick on purpose just so her supervisors believe her; she said they have let her go home sick, but “it was like walking on egg shells until I could redeem myself.” Among temporary workers in particular, job insecurity is so great that some have worked through on-the-job accidents. One worker recalled a time when he gashed his shin on the job. He went into the bathroom with a roll of tape and a cloth and kept working. The next day, a supervisor noticed him limping; she sent him home on unpaid leave—and he was grateful to be asked back when his injury healed.

Workers with children and elderly parents face particularly hard choices. Several say they put their families first, but others can’t afford that choice. One dad said, “About a year ago I had to pick my [sick] daughter up at school and I had to leave [work] half an hour early. They looked at me like I was lying...They [added] points.” A tortilla factory worker recalled that when her children were younger, “I didn’t care if I would lose my job because they [came] first.”

Workers value employers that take personal obligations into account and are willing to be flexible.

A computer parts manufacturing worker praised her former employer for adapting her schedule to meet her childcare needs: “When I was supposed to start working there...I was told the hours were from 6 to 2. Then...they told me it would be from 8 to 4:30. That’s when I asked [my supervisor] if I could come in an hour later, take half an hour for lunch, and leave [at 2]. And he didn’t have a problem with that.”

**WHAT IS THE BEST
WAY TO MAKE
WORKPLACES
FAMILY-FRIENDLY?**

“Be more understanding of people who have families. Know things happen unexpectedly—you can’t control if your child gets sick or you get sick.”

“We need more jobs and better pay. Everything is going up—my check is gone just with bills. We need paid vacation and more paid sick time. Find me a good-paying job so I can take care of me and my family and also enjoy my kids.”

“They should be more lenient about mandatory overtime. And all people should have insurance and paid sick time... [With that consideration they] would do a better job.”

“They should provide more daycare...Most of the daycares open at 6 a.m. and it’s not enough time for some of us. Most companies start at 6 a.m.”

“You should be able to tell your employer your [family] situation without fear.”

“If they know you have to stay with your child, they shouldn’t make you work mandatory overtime.”

In contrast, one temporary production worker explained he felt “helpless” when he needed time away to care for his 90-year-old father. The worker had been putting in 60 hours a week. “When I tried to explain the situation, [the owner] said ‘If you can’t do the job, maybe I got the wrong person.’”

Almost always, workers must take family and medical leave without pay, creating great financial hardship and significant concerns about job loss.

One worker described an upcoming four- to six-week leave for surgery. In light of recent layoffs and a change in company ownership, he expressed concern about having a job when he is ready to return. The company has just 35 employees, so his leave is not protected by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Only one worker interviewed had a good experience with longer-term medical leave. “They were willing to accommodate me to work less [than my usual 12-hour shift] if I wanted to,” a mechanic said about returning after FMLA leave for a brain aneurysm. “That made me feel good.”

Workers’ most poignant struggles arise when they need longer term leave to care for a new baby or a sick child. They feel significant tension between making ends meet and providing care.

A scrap metal worker recalled that she took four weeks of leave after her daughter’s birth. She wanted to take the full 12 weeks permitted under the FMLA but needed to work to pay the bills. An account manager recalled taking just six weeks when her daughter was born, despite being told that she could take eight. “It was upsetting,” she explained. “It was my first child and I wanted time off to be with her.” A production worker whose daughter has cystic fibrosis took a one-week unpaid leave—something he said he felt comfortable doing only because he had developed a good relationship with his supervisor. When asked how he afforded the leave, he replied, “The best phrase I can use is ‘under pressure.’ I love my babies to the fullest, but if I don’t get that money, we’ll be broke.”

Key Solution:

Better policies that provide workers with basic flexibility and workplace protections to promote economic security and boost business productivity.

Manufacturing workers desperately want a cushion in terms of scheduling and hours, and they say paid sick days and affordable family leave would help workers and benefit business.

Workers believe both government and business can help create better working conditions and a more productive and loyal workforce by providing basic flexibility and workplace protections. As one recently laid-off worker explained, “If you’re happy and your customers are happy, that’s making your business grow.” Workers with long shifts also said that they believe shorter hours would benefit everyone. Many workers mentioned paid sick days as a critical workplace support.

“Paid sick days would help me a lot so I don’t have to worry about whether I have a job or not when I come in the next day.”

— Chicago Temporary Production Worker

Many workers, including permanent employees, say that temporary workers should have a path to permanent positions or at least equity in pay and benefits—and they note this would improve morale for all workers.

A full-time skilled permanent worker said, “We have a lot of [temp workers] come in for more than six months and don’t get hired. I don’t think that’s right. They don’t even have insurance.” Others report feeling strongly that temporary workers should be paid the same as equivalent-level permanent workers and should receive some benefits—“a few personal days instead of feeling like you’re being threatened because you have to go to the doctor,” explained a production worker.