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Thursday, September 9, 2004



David Guralnick / The Detroit News

Floyd Brooks, a 26-year Ford veteran, leaves work after his shift at the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn. Beefed-up absenteeism enforcement now means "if you're not actually real hurt, they're not going to buy it."

Ford: Show up for work

Automaker, UAW aim to cut unauthorized worker absenteeism at Rouge, other plants

By Eric Mayne, and Brett Clanton / The Detroit News

DEARBORN — [Ford Motor Co.](#) and the United Auto Workers are cracking down on chronic absenteeism in an attempt to reduce soaring costs that are chipping away at the automaker's bottom line.

Ford is targeting habitual no-shows with warning letters, local union bosses are urging line workers to shape up and plant managers are toughening disciplinary practices against employees who fail to show up on a whim.

Despite making major productivity strides in recent years, Detroit's automakers have been unable to significantly reduce absenteeism, an enormously costly and disruptive problem.

Absenteeism among hourly workers in the automotive industry runs about 10 percent annually, about three times higher than in other industries, according to a study published this year by the Automotive Supplier Action Committee, a trade group. At some Big Three plants, absenteeism runs as high as 20 percent.

The figures include vacations, paid personal days off and medical leave, but the most crippling problem is employees who

Cost of absenteeism

► GM spends \$125 million a year for every 1 percentage point change in its rate of absenteeism.

► Ford spends an estimated \$100 million for every percentage point change in its absenteeism rate.

► At the Chrysler Group, the cost per percentage point is about \$60 million.

► Honda Motor Co. offers bonuses of up to \$2,600 a year for workers with perfect attendance.

► At Toyota, workers with perfect attendance are eligible for drawings to win a new vehicle.

CyberSurvey

Auto plant no-shows

Ford Motor Co. is cracking down on excessive absenteeism at its plants, no longer waiting for a fifth incidence of truancy to mete out punishment. Is the tougher stance on absenteeism justified?

Yes

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just skip work. Managers must scramble to find hundreds of replacements from pools of fill-in workers to perform tasks for which they may not be trained.

During last year's contract talks, the UAW agreed to work with Ford, [General Motors Corp.](#) and [DaimlerChrysler AG's](#) Chrysler Group to crack down on no-shows. Now at several Ford plants, a tough message is going out to workers.

At Ford's truck factory in Louisville, Ky., where F-Series Super Duty pickups are produced, a union bulletin in June warned that Ford no longer would wait for a fifth incidence of truancy to mete out punishment.

"You could be subject to discipline on your very first absence," the bulletin said.

A similar crackdown is expected to spread to the automaker's nearby Louisville assembly plant, where Ford produces the Explorer and Mercury Mountaineer sport utility vehicles.

At Ford's Rouge complex, a union update distributed to some workers last month laid out the issue in stark terms.

"The number of employees that are absent in this plant every day is a problem," the bulletin said. "We have to come to work or we may not have a job to come to."

Automakers and many UAW workers say there is no excuse for high absenteeism. Line workers receive up to five weeks of vacation and 17 paid holidays. When plants are idled for retooling or slow sales, workers also collect pay. "Sick days" are not provided and are supposed to come out of vacation time unless it's a prolonged illness that requires a leave.

"I've never seen it this bad," said Rufus McWilliams, a Ford employee for 31 years who now works in the paint shop at Rouge's Dearborn Truck plant — home of the popular Rouge factory tour. "A lot of younger workers just don't want to go by the schedule. It's a different mind-set with some of these guys."

Ford says absenteeism has remained fairly steady in recent years. But there's no doubt the automaker is taking a tougher line against the relatively small number of workers who are creating most of the problem. Ford said 12 percent of hourly workers account for nearly half of all absenteeism.

"Management is focusing on absenteeism as one way to help the company," said Ford spokeswoman Marcey Evans. "It's not because we think it's a bigger issue. We're looking at it as waste in the system. Absenteeism causes a lot of waste."

Floyd Brooks, a 26-year Ford veteran who feeds parts to main assembly lines at the Rouge truck plant, said absenteeism is nothing new. But Ford has beefed up enforcement by cracking down on bogus doctor notes and questioning suspicious illnesses.

"If you're not actually real hurt," he said, "they're not going to buy it."

Under a pilot program, Ford is drafting a warning letter intended for chronic offenders at various plants. Such warnings have been effective before, Evans said.

Ford, however, said there it will not factor in absenteeism in determining future production plans.

In an era of paper-thin auto profit margins, absenteeism presents an opportunity to wring out savings. Every percentage point of absenteeism in GM's factories cost the company \$125 million a ye

No

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cost per percentage point is about \$60 million year. The story is similar at Ford.

In Norfolk, Va., where Ford builds its popular F-150 pickup, total absenteeism has an annual price tag of \$9 million, according to a newsletter distributed to employees in April.

Japanese automakers, which experience less absenteeism on average, employ a carrot-and-stick approach to encourage good attendance, rewarding workers with superior records. [Honda Motor Co.](#)'s Ohio plants offer bonuses of up to \$2,600 annually, but workers who do not maintain a 98 percent attendance rate are put into counseling programs.

[Toyota Motor Co.](#)'s Georgetown, Ky., plant conducts drawings for employees with perfect attendance. The prizes: free vehicles.

The labor contract between Detroit automakers and the UAW protects workers stricken with personal crises such as substance abuse — a frequent cause of absenteeism — but can also prolong their problems, said Maryland psychologist Michael Walsh.

“From a social responsibility perspective, trying to deal with these folks is a good thing to do,” said Walsh, founder of the Walsh Group and an adviser on drug abuse policy to the Bush administration. “But from a business perspective, taking a hard line is more reasonable.”

During last year's contract talks, Chrysler sought and won stricter disciplinary practices to lower absenteeism. The new contract reduced the limit of unexcused absences from 12 to eight before a worker gets an unpaid month off. Previously, it took nine no-shows to get a written warning.

Since the policy went into effect in December, the company has noticed a decline in absenteeism at its Warren truck plant, site of Dodge pickup production. But the reduction in absenteeism is attributed to the establishment of a third shift, which reduced overtime, said spokeswoman Mary Beth Halprin.

Burnout triggered by prolonged overtime is a prime cause of unauthorized absenteeism. Similarly, inexperience with the rigors of factory life can be overwhelming.

The work force at Ford's Dearborn truck plant has risen by 300 to 2,400 so the automaker could accommodate production of its hot-selling F-150 pickup. But many of the plant's new workers transferred from component plants where the pace of production is less taxing, said Jerry Sullivan, president of UAW Local 600.

“It's going to take a while for people to get in the groove there,” Sullivan said, adding the union is working with Ford to smooth the transition for these workers.

Ford's effort to reduce absenteeism comes at a time when its automotive operations are battling back.

While no one disputes that absenteeism is an issue, some UAW officials challenge the way rates are calculated. Ed Hay, UAW chairman at Ford's Norfolk plant, said estimates that absenteeism at the plant costs the company \$9 million a year are misleading.

“The company's actual numbers are not an accurate measure of what's going on,” Hay said. “I've looked at (the numbers) very closely. They take into account people's calendar days off — for personal leave or vacation, as well as medical leaves of absence — and they roll it all into one ball called absenteeism.”

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