**Headline:** How Union Workers Are Fighting for a Life Outside of the Mill

By Tom Conway

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**[Article Body:]**

She only wanted a few hours at her dying mother’s bedside.

But the woman’s bosses at Twin Rivers Paper in Madawaska, Maine, lacked all decency and forced her to the mill on overtime even though it was her day off.

About an hour and a half into the mandatory shift, the woman’s mother died. She left the mill heartbroken, exploited by an industry that continues to [spurn workers’ basic need for work-life balance](https://www.mainepublic.org/business-and-economy/2023-05-18/mill-workers-say-they-need-legislative-help-putting-an-end-to-mandatory-overtime).

Now, workers are battling harder than ever to end this appalling mistreatment. They’re fighting back—at the bargaining table and at the state capitol—against inhumane mandatory overtime requirements that strain families to the breaking point and put lives at risk.

“It’s definitely caused a lot of heartache at the mill,” said David Hebert, financial officer and former president of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 291, one of three USW locals collectively representing about 360 workers at Twin Rivers.

USW members long warned paper companies about the need to increase hiring and training to keep facilities operating safely and efficiently. Yet some employers preferred to keep working people to the bone.

Workers at Twin Rivers, for example, work a base shift of 12 hours. On top of that, to fill in the schedule, each can be drafted for an additional 12-hour shift every month regardless of whether they want the extra hours.

But it gets much worse.

Hebert and his coworkers also face the possibility of having a 12-hour shift extended with six hours of mandatory overtime, without warning or advance notice, virtually any day bosses choose.

And they’re often forced to pull multiple 18-hour days in a week, especially when winter cold and flu season exacerbates the company’s intentional understaffing. Many of these union members commute 45 minutes or more each way, meaning they get only a few hours of sleep at a time.

“There are some days when people really hold their breath at the end of their shift,” explained Hebert, noting workers often find out about forced overtime only when they’re ready to head home.

The coworker who [lost her mother](https://maineaflcio.org/news/paper-workers-usw-push-bill-curb-forced-overtime), for example, learned at the end of an 18-hour shift that she’d have to report the following day for overtime.

While that example is particularly devastating, paper workers across Maine experience their own heartaches when unpredictable schedules leave them unable to make plans with their families or force them to miss graduations, anniversaries, birthday parties, holiday gatherings, or other events they’d hope to attend.

“Family is the only reason we go into these places. I want to spend time with them, too,” said Justin Shaw, president of USW Local 9, which represents workers at Sappi’s Somerset Mill in Skowhegan.

“You’ve got many people who work seven days a week,” with some required to log 24 hours at a stretch, Shaw said. “If we had better staffing levels, we wouldn’t have people working outrageous hours.”

Besides the toll it takes on family life, excessive overtime compounds the risk in an industry that exposes workers to hazardous chemicals, fast-moving machinery, super-hot liquids, and huge rolls of paper.

“It only takes a split second to lose a finger, an arm, or a life,” Shaw said, warning that extreme fatigue also puts workers at risk while traveling to and from the mill.

“I’ve had many drives home that I can’t recall over half the ride. We have had many individuals in the ditch or wreck vehicles trying to keep up with the demands,” Shaw told legislators in May.

Shaw and other USW members [testified in support of legislation](https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/politics/maine-politics/bill-aims-to-limit-mandatory-overtime-for-pulp-paper-mill-workers-maine/97-1f01c141-64df-4567-9700-ad09e86b9513), sponsored by state Senate President Troy Jackson, that aims to hold employers accountable.

The bill would [limit mandatory overtime](https://legislature.maine.gov/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=SP0719&item=1&snum=131) to no more than two hours per day and require employers to provide a week’s notice before mandating extra hours or changing a worker’s schedule.

The legislation places no caps on voluntary overtime. Nor would it apply to true emergencies, such as when a mill needs extra hands to avert “immediate danger to life or property.”

But it would help to end the capricious usurping of workers’ lives that now occurs because of the industry’s failure to hire enough people for regular operations—a crisis [Jackson describes](https://m.facebook.com/TroyJacksonmaine/posts/683991537066243/) as “not safe” and “not fair.”

Union members also continue to drive change at the bargaining table. Workers are pushing both Twin Rivers and Sappi, for example, to create pools of workers whose role is to fill in where needed on a given shift.

These so-called “share pools” virtually eliminated mandatory overtime at the Huhtamaki facility in Waterville, where workers once had to put in so many hours that some slept in their cars rather than commute home, said Lee Drouin, president of USW Local 449.

Drouin recalled that a USW leader traveled to Finland, the company’s headquarters, to [confront the CEO](https://maineaflcio.org/news/paper-workers-usw-push-bill-curb-forced-overtime) and make clear that union members weren’t going to tolerate excessive overtime any longer. Then, about four years ago, Local 449 members followed up by negotiating the pools into their contract.

“Nothing’s perfect, but it’s working pretty well,” Drouin said. “It keeps the machinery running, and it keeps people from being drafted. It accomplishes both of the things we need to do.”

Drouin said other paper companies also need to realize that change is essential for workers but benefits them as well.

“The mills have to understand, this is not going to go away,” he said, referring to workers’ demands for fair treatment. “To me, it makes a lot more sense to have happy workers and safe workers.”