

Auto parts workers strike at Borgers USA plant in Norwalk, Ohio

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Auto parts workers in Norwalk, Ohio began a strike on January 21 for wage and benefit improvements and to gain recognition of the union at their facility, owned by German manufacturer Borgers USA. Norwalk is roughly halfway between Cleveland and Toledo.

The plant makes materials for trim, carpet, and insulation for passenger and commercial vehicles. Borgers SE & Co. KgaA is headquartered in Bocholt, Germany, and has 6,410 employees worldwide. The Norwalk facility employs 419 and was opened in 2015.

The Borger workers are striking to gain a contract with the company through the trade union Workers United-Chicago Midwest Regional Joint BRD (CMRJB). Workers United was formed in 2009 out of a factional split within the UNITE HERE union bureaucracy, with the faction around UNITE HERE's then-president Bruce Raynor leaving the union to form Workers United. It is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

In a statement to local media Bryan Eastman, a material handler at Borgers said, "I love what I do, but the pay scale is all over the place, and the insurance has gotten worse."

Autoworkers at the nearby Ventra auto parts plant, a Flex-N-Gate subsidiary, at Sandusky, Ohio, expressed their support for the strike. The 2,200 UAW Local 1216-affiliated Ventra workers recently had a local contract rammed through by the United Auto Workers, in spite of an overwhelming vote to authorize a strike. The poverty wages paid at both Ventra and Borgers point to the need for a unified struggle at these plants, and across the industry.

A Borger worker who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* explained that the starting pay for new hires is a meager 13 dollars per hour. "We are only asking to bring up the starting pay to 15 dollars [per hour] and to

give equal raises across the board. They promise a five percent raise, but will only give those they like the five percent, and if you are not liked, you get less."

"They brought in a lot of temporary people to cover those on strike. They brought in enough to cover all three shifts.

"There were a few people that had [COVID-19]. I am one of them. All they did was just have people walk around with disinfectant sprays and wipe things down. On all shifts."

"They have an [Apple] iPad that takes your temp by the time clock. They have implemented a mask order inside the plant but they don't enforce it. If the supervisor likes you, they don't say anything to you. If they don't like you, they make sure to tell you, and threaten you with a write-up if you do not wear your mask. As far as social distancing, they only have plastic screens, but they don't separate the workers."

"The struggles are linked together. As the price of everything goes up, it gets harder and harder for people to be able to afford even the basic necessities."

The just-in-time (JIT) production methods which major automakers use for their supply chains means that the strike almost immediately began to impede production at Borgers' customers, which includes General Motors plants in Lansing and Lake Orion in Michigan, Spring Hill in Tennessee, and Fairfax and Wentzville in Missouri.

Assembly plants throughout the United States were already being hit with supply issues before the strike, particularly a semiconductor shortage caused in part by new sanctions last year against China by the Trump administration. Ford shut down its Louisville Assembly Plant beginning on Monday for two weeks due to the chip shortage. GM's Fairfax Assembly Plant is also canceling planned overtime for the month of February

due to supply issues.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party supports the struggle by Borgers workers. We call for the broadest support for the strikers among our readers and supporters.

However, while we defend the democratic right of Borgers workers to join a union without fear of harassment or retribution from management, the unions themselves offer no way forward because they have long functioned as agencies of corporate management. At both the major assembly plants and at unionized parts suppliers such as Faurecia and Ventra, the unions have worked hand-in-glove with the companies throughout the coronavirus pandemic to enforce unsafe working conditions and to cover up the spread of infections.

As for the SEIU, while it has been compelled to call several strikes throughout the pandemic, it has worked to isolate them and shut them down as quickly as possible. This was the case, for example, with the five-day strike by Alameda County nurses in California and the strike at the Four Seasons nursing home in suburban Detroit, both of which took place last October.

The way forward for the striking Borger auto parts workers is to form a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the CMRBJ. This will provide the means for striking workers to develop their own initiative independent of the union bureaucracy, and to link up their struggle with auto parts workers and other sections of the working class throughout northern Ohio and the country as a whole.



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