

Hundreds of Clarios workers strike Toledo, Ohio battery plant to fight pay cuts

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Are you a striking Clarios worker? Fill out the form at the end of this article to get more information about building a rank-and-file committee.

Over 500 Clarios workers in Holland, Ohio walked out on strike Monday morning to demand substantial pay increases and improved working conditions at the battery manufacturing plant just outside of Toledo. United Auto Workers Local 12 officials called the strike after workers rejected a UAW-backed tentative agreement by 99 percent a week-and-a-half earlier.

Clarios is the largest acid-lead battery manufacturer in the world, with workers at its factories in the Americas, Europe and Asia producing 150 million batteries a year. In 2016, private equity firm Brookfield Business Partners bought the company from Johnson Controls for \$13.2 billion and it is seeking to cut costs and squeeze the maximum profit from its workers to finance its expansion into the far more profitable electric vehicle battery market. In a meeting with big investors last week, Clarios CEO Mark Wallace—who pocketed \$5.5 million last year—boasted that the company made \$1.6 billion in profits last year and would push that figure to over \$2 billion in the next few years.

The last straw for workers at the Toledo area plant, who already work under dangerous and exhausting conditions, was Brookfield's changes to piece rates, which amount to a de facto wage cut on top of the losses in real income workers have suffered from rising food, fuel and housing costs. When UAW Local 12 negotiators brought back a tentative agreement that included an insulting 3 percent a year raise, workers voted it down in an all-but-unanimous vote and demanded immediate strike action. After delaying the walkout for 11 days, the UAW officials were forced to sanction the strike Monday morning.

“If the union did not call us out, we were ready to go out anyway, and we knew the union would have to follow us,” a young worker with seven years in the factory told the WSWS. “We voted to strike by 99.9 percent with only three ‘no’ votes.”

He continued, “We get paid for the number of units we build. But a lot of time, it’s out of our control because the machines break down. Now they’re reducing our pay. We had a town hall meeting in the plant and we asked the plant manager, Rick, if HR and the rest of management was taking a pay cut too. He had the nerve to say that the managers had chosen the right career path and we didn’t.”

Describing the intolerable working conditions, he continued, “This company demands a lot of hours out of you, and I’m gone most of the time, missing my kids’ life. They have a 19-2 schedule. You work 19 days straight, mostly on 12-hour shifts, then you get two days off. After that they work you for another 19 days again. All our personal time is lost.”

On top of that, he said, “We do not get any hazard pay. We work with powdered oxide and lead, and we touch it and breathe it. They draw blood from us every month to check the lead levels in our blood. You also got signs all over the place about asbestos being present. It’s wrong. People quit or retire from here and boom, they get cancer and die.”

“Since Brookfield took us over, everything has changed,” another worker with seven years told the WSWS. “They want us to produce more for the same pay. They’ve also changed the point system to use any excuses to put more people out.”

“In my department, we work with lead mixed with acid that has the consistency of Play-Doh. This is formed on lead grids into the plates that go into the batteries. It’s dangerous work and all they want to do is

take money from us. They don't care about us."

A worker with more than two decades at the plant said, "It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Women in their child-bearing ages are moved away from the most dangerous areas with lead, but it's still unsafe for everyone else. Workers call OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) to report unsafe conditions. Their inspectors come out, but the company just puts band-aids on things and tells us it's safe."

Several picketers connected the unsafe conditions at the plant with the tragic deaths of two young BP oil refinery workers—Ben and Max Morrissey—at the nearby BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio last September. Despite the demands of workers, BP management refused to shut down unstable crude units at the plant, leading to an explosion and the deaths of the two brothers. OSHA issued BP a wrist-slap fine of \$150,000 for their deaths, but the oil giant is contesting it.

A picketer told the WSWS: "I knew those boys. They were young like me with kids and families. I almost got a job there, but workers told me you had to climb up these tall units and they could blow up at any time. None of these companies care about our lives."

There was a militant mood among workers on the picket lines. They were glad to finally take collective action that was hitting the corporation's bottom line. "I'm going to strike for as long as it takes," a young worker said, adding, "We work too hard, and they treat us like garbage."

Another worker said, "We need more pay, especially with inflation. I'm working six or seven days a week just to keep up my lifestyle. Everything is going up except our pay." Pointing to the extreme levels of social inequality, he stated bluntly, "There is going to be a revolution."

At the same time, there was concern that the UAW officials would try to prematurely shut down the strike and push through another sellout contract before workers even had a chance to study and discuss the deal. "We are not going back to work until we get to see and vote on the full contract. That's our demand," one young worker told the WSWS.

The Clarios workers have taken a courageous stand, but they cannot fight their battle alone.

In the early afternoon, Lucas County sheriff's

deputies showed up to escort trucks through the strikers' picket lines and threatened workers with arrest if they did not let the trucks pass. At the same time, the UAW International, now headed by President Shawn Fain, is determined to shut the strike down as soon as possible to prevent the strike from expanding to 140,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers who face their own contract battle this summer.

But this is exactly what Clarios workers need to prevail. Such a fight must be organized by the workers themselves by building a rank-and-file strike committee to transfer decision-making and power from the UAW apparatus to the workers on the picket lines. This committee must reach out to Stellantis Jeep workers at the Toledo Assembly Complex, also members of UAW Local 12, to ban any handling of any Clarios batteries until the strike is won.

A delegation from the Dana Rank-and-File Committee was warmly received by Clarios workers on Monday afternoon. Several strikers had family members who work at the nearby Dana Driveline plant, where management has victimized scores of workers for speaking out against sweatshop conditions and management abuse. The Dana workers carried signs calling for the unity of Dana and Clarios workers and common action by rank-and-file workers against both the companies and the collusion of the UAW bureaucracy.

"We are the wheels of this auto machine and we need to stick together," a striking worker said, agreeing with the need to unite all autoworkers against the attack on jobs, living standards and working conditions.

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