

The Clarios strike and the global counteroffensive of the working class

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On Thursday, a county judge in Toledo, Ohio issued an injunction barring striking workers at the car battery company Clarios from picketing in groups of more than five.

Judge Michael Goulding, a Republican, issued this anti-democratic ruling after the corporation said the strike had created an “emergency of a grave and serious nature” by stopping the production of batteries to the Big Three automakers and their assembly plants across the United States. The injunction order, which claims workers are creating “danger” by picketing, is an attack on workers’ right to strike and freedom of assembly.

The injunction reveals the class character of the state. The courts, police and government agencies are not neutral arbiters sitting above the class struggle, but servants of the corporations enforcing the demands of the rich. Under capitalism, companies can avoid paying taxes, violate health and safety regulations and still receive government bailouts, while law-abiding workers in Toledo can go to jail or face fines for picketing six-at-a-time.

Nearly 90 years ago, in 1934, the courts of Toledo issued an injunction against a strike by auto parts workers at the Electric Auto-Lite plant led by socialists. Workers defied the order and the strike spread, with thousands more workers and unemployed people joining picket lines in the weeks that followed. That May, Lucas County Sheriffs and 900 National Guard troops—deployed by the state’s Democratic governor, George White—attacked strikers, killing two.

The strike was part of a nationwide rebellion of the rank and file against the conservative leadership of the American Federation of Labor, and was followed two years later by the wave of sit-down strikes that led to the recognition of the United Auto Workers union by General Motors.

In the present, the rapid intervention of the courts into the week-long strike by autoworkers shows the extreme sensitivity of the US government and the auto corporations to the development of the class struggle in the United States amid rising inflation and as the Biden administration directs tens of billions of dollars to fund its war against Russia in Ukraine.

The injunction is a sign that the ruling class views the strike at Clarios not as a mere contractual or local issue, but as a struggle with far-reaching national and international implications.

The walkout by 525 workers is a pivotal battle in the industry-wide transition to electric vehicles (EV) and a sign of what is to come when the contracts for 150,000 Big Three workers expire in September. The Biden administration has dedicated immense political capital to carrying out a shift to EVs, which it views as necessary to outpace Chinese production, limit reliance on oil from Russia and the Middle East, and develop the type of nationally-based supply chain required for a war economy.

Clarios, which employs 16,000 people at 56 plants across the world, occupies a critical chokepoint in both the transition to EVs and the global auto industry as a whole. Formerly Johnson Controls, Clarios produces batteries used in one third of all cars on the planet.

The contract it offered workers at its Holland, Ohio plant includes a 3 percent annual wage increase (a substantial pay cut after accounting for inflation) and an effective ban on overtime that will cut workers’ pay checks by an average of \$15,000 each year. Workers rejected the contract by 98 percent in a sign of a growing readiness to fight.

The ruthless terms of this poverty contract are being dictated by the Big Three and the big banks as necessary to make the transition to EVs. Clarios is in the process of shifting production to produce batteries for EVs and has received hundreds of millions of dollars from the Department of Energy for this purpose in recent years.

On a call with investors last week, Clarios CEO Mark Wallace said the switch to EV will “drive 50 percent to 80 percent higher revenue and double the profitability dollars of a standard low voltage battery,” but that making the shift will require “an additional \$50 million in cost savings driven largely by the enhancements of our US operations.” Wallace also noted on the investors’ call that interest rate hikes have driven up debt liabilities, which the company is seeking to offset by extracting even more concessions from the

workforce.

The Clarios strike is also revealing the weaknesses of the “just-in-time delivery” system adopted by the corporations in recent decades to cut costs and improve profit margins. The 525 workers at Clarios produce 150,000 batteries per week for Ford and GM. Duncan Aldred, global vice president of GM’s Buick and GMC division, said last September that the company’s inventory is “historically low.” In an April 16 article, *Automotive News* warned that “the supply chain is in worse shape today than in 2019, when a GM strike hit hard,” and that “a strike in 2023 would be worse.”

The strike at Clarios comes as the corporations plan to slash hundreds of thousands of jobs. As the *New York Times* acknowledged on May 3, the switch to EVs comes “with costs for autoworkers, because it takes fewer than half the laborers to assemble an all-electric vehicle as it does to build a gasoline-powered car.”

At plants across the US, opposition is growing among the rank and file over layoffs, threats of plant closures and arbitrary changes to schedules. Injuries and unsafe conditions are becoming more frequent as the companies speed up production ahead of the contract expiration. In a sign of the yearning for a united struggle, workers from multiple auto plants in the Toledo, Ohio area have traveled to join the picket line at Clarios, while many workers on social media express their desire to expand the strike.

The corporations and the government are relying on the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy to hold back the rank and file and force through terms palatable to Wall Street, the auto corporations and the government. UAW President Shawn Fain, who was elected in a fraudulent election marked by historically low turnout, has not issued any statement about the Clarios strike, and has not made an appearance on the picket line, although the strike is taking place only an hour’s drive from UAW headquarters in Detroit.

The actions of the UAW bureaucracy in the Clarios strike expose the narrative promoted in the corporate media that Fain is a “reformer” who will make the UAW “democratic” after years of corruption and collaboration with the companies. Clarios workers were forced to vote on the contract after being given only a “highlights” page, exploding as lies the UAW vice president for GM’s statement to the *Detroit Free Press* that the Fain administration is “not going to hide anything, everything will be discussed. I’m opposed to highlights.” The Fain administration has allowed assembly plants handling Clarios batteries to continue production.

There is not a shadow of doubt that the UAW bureaucracy is conspiring behind workers’ backs to force through

sellouts at Clarios and beyond. In an internal memo from March, Fain’s office warned that workers have “unrealistic expectations” about winning massive wage increases, abolishing tiers, fixing unsafe working conditions and winning cost-of-living adjustments. “Expectations have to match reality and where we are,” Fain’s memo said. “We can’t set unreasonably high bargaining expectations... This won’t be accomplished in 6 months.”

The bureaucracy is an obstacle to the membership fighting for what it needs. In last year’s UAW presidential election, rank-and-file socialist Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman ran on the platform of abolishing the UAW bureaucracy, ending the dictatorship of Solidarity House, transferring power and democratic decision-making to rank and file committees on the shop floor, and unifying workers up and down the supply chain.

Critically, Lehman called for an international strategy to combat the transnational corporations and appealed to workers to join and build worker-controlled rank-and-file committees linked globally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The UAW bureaucracy suppressed the vote so that masses of workers would not have the chance to vote for a rank-and-file candidate.

The election is over, but Lehman’s rank-and-file and internationalist strategy points the way forward.

This year, for the first time in decades, the contracts for US and Canadian Big Three workers expire at the same time. At present, nearly 300 auto parts workers at THK Rhythm Automotive have been on strike for nearly three weeks in St. Catharines, Ontario after rejecting a sellout contract by a 251-11 vote. Contracts for tens of thousands of auto parts workers along the US-Mexico border in cities like Matamoros, Mexico expired May 1.

The same conditions are driving workers in every country into struggle, as evidenced by the growth of strikes and protests in France, Germany, Sri Lanka and all over the world. Workers across Toledo have already formed a rank-and-file committee to link their struggles with this global movement and reverse a half-century of concessions.

To build this worldwide network fighting for the interests of the working class, join the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today.



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