

# Clarios workers in Germany support Toledo strike and report dangerous working conditions

**Our reporters**

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The strike by 525 workers at the Clarios battery plant in the US state of Ohio will soon enter its second week. The workers are fighting against pay cuts, scheduling changes and unsafe working conditions.

The Clarios workers are in a critical battle against a multinational company that supplies the batteries for one out of three automobiles produced globally. Under many different brand names, Clarios operates plants in dozens of countries, including France, Italy, Belgium, India, China, Brazil and Germany.

In a statement published earlier this week, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) explained to workers the need to “approach the strike strategically, as a critical battle in a broader war.” The outcome of the struggle will have an enormous impact not only for the 173,000 Big Three auto workers in the US and Canada, whose contracts expire later this year, but for workers throughout the world.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke Wednesday with Clarios workers at the company’s European headquarters in Hanover, Germany about the strike in Ohio and its significance. The Clarios Varta site in Germany is home to the largest battery plant for automotive applications in Europe.

Clarios operates 12 plants in seven countries in Europe with more than 3,800 employees, with about 1,300 working in Hanover. Many sites continue to produce lead-acid automotive batteries for cars and trucks.

Most of the workers at the Hanover site are employed by subcontractors or so-called outside companies. Many are long-term “temporary” workers. All those interviewed said they had not been informed about the strike by their US colleagues, either by the trade unions, the works council, company management or the media.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy brought a tentative agreement to Clarios workers that would have allowed 12-hour shifts without overtime pay and would have introduced a 2-2-3 rotating shift model. Toledo workers rejected this contract by 98 percent, forcing a strike. Since then, the company has been using strikebreakers, with the support of the police. It has obtained a court injunction prohibiting pickets of

more than five workers.

Meanwhile, the UAW and the IG Metall union in Germany are trying to keep the strike secret, doing nothing to organize support for the Toledo workers.

In Hanover, WSWs reporters distributed an information leaflet, to which management reacted extremely nervously. After plant security ordered the reporters off the premises, Christian Riedel (Director of Communications, Clarios EMEA) appeared a few minutes later and demanded a leaflet. Unlike the workers, Riedel was well aware of the strike (“This has been going on for two weeks”).

A temporary worker with whom the WSWs spoke supported the strike by workers in Toledo: “Yes, because if the salary is lower than inflation, they can’t live on it. So, I definitely support the strike.”

The worker said, “With global inflation, everything is changing. All over the world it is difficult. It’s not normal times anymore. First came the coronavirus pandemic, now the Ukraine war. We are no longer living in normal times. Things will never be the same.”

Yet workers everywhere faced the same problems, he said. “It’s not just about one or two or three countries. No matter where you look, inflation is going up and everything is getting more expensive. When you go to the supermarket, you can’t buy anything. And your salary is very low at the same time.”

Union bureaucrats “just don’t think about us at all,” he added. “So, we workers have to unite and face our problems together.” And since a company like Clarios operates internationally, workers should also “unite internationally and fight for a common goal.”

The WSWs spoke with two other temporary workers who also supported the Toledo strike but wished to remain anonymous. “If we say something publicly against the company, as temporary workers we get fired directly,” one of them said. “But you should sneak an undercover reporter team into the plant here sometime to show what’s going on.”

Markus is 35 years old and has worked at Clarios for several years. He said, “I haven’t given a blood sample in months because I know my lead levels are way above the limit, and

then I would lose my job.”

According to Markus, the company skimps on occupational health and safety measures. For example, toxic lead vapours are not disposed of properly, and illegally escape into the environment through open windows. “We sometimes have to wait days for protective clothing.”

“Temporary workers keep this company running, there are hardly any permanent employees left here,” Markus continued. “Unlike permanent staff, we temporary workers have not received the ‘inflation compensation’ payment, even though we do exactly the same work as a permanent employee. At the same time, we already get less pay anyway. Many colleagues must pay off loans for houses and cars, so it’s really difficult for them. At the same time, nothing would run here at all if we temporary workers took a holiday for once.”

However, he said, it is difficult to “create the necessary cohesion so that everyone pulls together.” Working conditions put pressure on many workers. “At a meeting a few months ago, the works council spoke of 40 colleagues who had died in recent years shortly after retiring. You ruin your health here, especially because of lead exposure.”

Tom, 19 years old, has only been working at Clarios for a few months. He told the WSWS, “A colleague who has kept the whole shift going for decades ruined his hip at work.” He said supervisors responded to his complaints by saying there was nothing they could do about it. “A department manager came down to the hall specifically to tell the colleague that he was ‘needed’ and couldn’t transfer him to a lighter position. This colleague has been sick for months now and will probably be unable to work for the rest of the year.

“Another suffered severe burns while working with Teflon because of a spark from a 400-degree oven next to him. He was on fire from head to toe, even though the protective clothing is not actually flammable. He is still in hospital today, months later, because he had to have skin grafts.”

One reason for the increase in such workplace accidents, Tom said, is that the company makes workers themselves responsible for instructing new colleagues on the complex machinery and operations.

He pulled out a work manual written in German. “Many new colleagues are refugees and don’t speak German at all; you have to make yourself understood using gestures. That’s why many don’t even know what hazardous materials they’re dealing with here. You often see people not wearing their protective masks properly, one even ate in the production hall. That can be life-threatening.”

Markus said, “The bosses have no idea about our work. They should try working here for even three hours. It’s exactly the same in the US. Our colleagues there should go on strike. It should happen here, too.”

In response to the comment that Clarios occupied an extraordinarily important position in the international automotive supply chain and that a strike would immediately

affect the entire automotive sector, Markus said, “I think that’s exactly what they need. That’s exactly what they need to do.”

Battery production at the Hanover site has a long history of extreme exploitation. Twenty years ago, the US multinational Johnson Controls bought the long-standing company Varta AG. It sold the Power Solutions division to Brookfield Business Partners in 2019, which led to the creation of Clarios.

However, battery production in Hanover had already begun in 1938 with the founding of the Akkumulatorenfabrik (AFA plant) by industrialist and Nazi profiteer Günther Quandt. Instead of the originally planned propulsion and starter lead batteries for various vehicles, propulsion batteries for submarines and torpedoes were produced from 1940. Quandt became one of the leading armaments producers for the Nazis.

Prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates were obliged to perform forced labour and were exploited under bestial conditions. To this end, a concentration camp was built directly on the factory site as a subcamp of the Neuengamme concentration camp. At least 1,500 concentration camp prisoners and 3,700 forced labourers were used in the AFA plant in Hanover. The deaths of at least 403 camp inmates are documented.

After the liberation from fascism on May 8, 1945, the factory buildings in Hanover were only slightly damaged. The plant was occupied by the British Army, which had batteries for its vehicles manufactured there. During “denazification,” Günther Quandt was classified as a “fellow traveller” even though he had been a *Wehrwirtschaftsführer* (Defence Economy Leader, appointed by the Nazis).

In 1948, Günther Quandt again took over the management of AFA. His first son, Herbert Quandt, became Chairman of the Board of Management in 1954 and his second son, Harald Quandt, Chairman of the Supervisory Board. The Quandts remain one of Germany’s richest families, with a combined net worth of €31 billion (\$39bn). (Valuable background information can be found in the WSWS article “*Nazi Billionaires by David de Jong: How Hitler’s financiers are still in business*”).

The WSWS urges workers throughout the world to support the Clarios strike and fight to broaden the struggle. Read and distribute the IWA-RFC statement, “A call to action to rank-and-file autoworkers: Mobilize support for the Clarios strike!” to help break the information blackout. For information on forming a rank-and-file Clarios Strike Solidarity Committee, fill out the form below.



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