

Constellium workers in Michigan strike for safety and a living wage

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Work at Constellium? We want to hear from you. Fill out the form at the end to tell us why you're striking and what your working conditions are like.

On Wednesday, 160 workers in the United Auto Workers union launched a strike at the Constellium automotive plant in suburban Detroit to demand improved health and safety conditions, wage increases to compensate for the soaring cost of living and an end to management's abusive disciplinary measures. The factory in Van Buren, Michigan, is a key supplier to Ford, producing aluminum structures and crash management systems for the Ford F-150, F-150 Lightning, Explorer and Super Duty at six assembly plants.

The Paris, France-based Constellium employs more than 12,000 workers internationally. The global manufacturer of aluminum rolled products, extruded products and structural parts had revenue of \$8.73 billion in 2022, including \$1.9 billion in sales to automakers. It had a net profit of \$332 million last year, up from \$282 million in 2021. CEO Jean-Marc Germain pocketed nearly \$9 million last year.

The Constellium strike is part of the growing wave of struggles by autoworkers against plans by the global automakers to force workers to pay for the transition to electric vehicles.

In Holland, Ohio, 525 UAW members have been on strike for over a week against Clarios, the world's largest auto battery manufacturer. Just days after a judge granted the company an injunction to limit picketing at the Toledo-area factory, Clarios began bringing in strikebreakers to continue the production of batteries for Ford, GM, Stellantis and other automakers.

The UAW called the strike after initially extending the previous contract for several days after its May 13

expiration date. In a statement, UAW Region 1D Director Laura Dickerson said that "on every single occasion, Constellium has made it very clear they have zero interest in taking our members' proposals seriously. This is a prime example of employer arrogance forcing the hand of its workforce."

But union officials are limiting the struggle to an "unfair labor practices" (ULP) strike and are no doubt seeking to call it off at the earliest opportunity. Negotiations had resumed Thursday, Michael Shumaker, a UAW international servicing rep, told *Automotive News*.

A Constellium spokesperson said that in negotiations the company's goal was to reach a "mutually beneficial agreement." In a thinly veiled threat, the spokesperson added, "We do not anticipate any disruption to our production and will work closely with our customers to ensure continuity of operations." On Thursday evening pickets told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that temps from a local agency were inside the plant working to maintain production.

Workers at Constellium cannot be left to fight the giant multinational company on their own. As long as the struggle remains in the hands of the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy, it will be isolated and lead to a contract which meets none of workers' basic needs.

For the struggle to succeed, workers should form a rank-and-file strike committee led by workers from the shop floor. Such a committee will allow workers at Constellium to communicate and coordinate actions with their striking brothers and sisters at Clarios, as well as workers at the Big Three and other parts manufacturers, and join the growing network of rank-and-file committees.

A rank-and-file committee at Constellium would provide workers the means to draw up a list of their

own demands, such as the restoration of COLA, wage increases large enough to compensate for years of below-inflation raises and rank-and-file workers control over health and safety measures.

“We need to unite with workers around the world”

Constellium workers on the picket lines Thursday described the issues they confronted, and many voiced their support for the statement issued Wednesday by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), A call to action to rank-and-file autoworkers: Mobilize support for the Clarios strike!

A rank-and-file picket summed up the sentiment on the line, saying, “I am so glad more people are getting involved in the strike movement. We need to unite with workers around the world.”

The mood among workers on the picket lines was combative. “In the last contract, we got a 3 percent wage increase per year,” one said. “The cost-of-living increase used to be called COLA. It was automatic. They want to give us 3 percent.” But with the rate of inflation at between 6 and 8 percent, she added, “now we cannot take 3 percent.

“The way rent went up, inflation, day care, everything went up, then you have to try to live on the same pay. How do they expect us to survive? I left General Motors making \$15.68 an hour to come here for \$3 more. Still it’s hardly enough to live on. What we need and what we get are two different things.

“A lot of companies don’t pay because they don’t believe the workers are going to fight. Across the street at Mayser, they make \$14 an hour. That’s nothing! You cannot live on it. Day care costs \$300-\$400 a week so you were just working to pay them. That’s what kids in high school are making. You cannot live off of that on your own.

“People like us have been with this company for years. We got them the Q1 flag this year. That is a very high standard of quality. It brings them more business. They got that off the sweat of our backs. It is us who are building them up. They should offer us some compensation for that.”

The Van Buren plant opened 10 years ago, and already workers are reporting chronic failures of basic maintenance and extremely hazardous conditions developing as a result. For example, the receiving docks overflow with water when it rains, workers said. Another extremely hazardous condition develops when Rust Lick cutting fluid leaks from the machines and mixes on the floor with rainwater that pours through the roof, they noted.

“There is a 24-inch circular saw that cuts an aluminum extrusion and then slides back out of the way,” the worker continued. “When the extrusion comes forward, it cuts another piece. I know the standard operating procedure says you have to put the brake on the saw before you clean it. But there is no brake. An inexperienced operator who is trying to hurry up could fall into that saw and be killed.

“OSHA was called, but they didn’t fix the issue. They don’t care about us.

“At the Novi plant before we moved here, we had a girl running a rotating welding machine that made a part for the Chevy Cruze. Every time the machine cycled it rubbed against an electrical power cable. Eventually it wore through the insulation and charged the metal of the machine. The bosses joked about it.”

The Constellium strike in Michigan is at least the second walkout by workers at the company in recent years. At the end of 2020, 400 aluminum workers, members of the United Steelworkers union, walked out at a Constellium plant in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, over unsafe working conditions, threats by the company to end seniority rights and cuts to health care benefits. Like the UAW, the USW limited the struggle to a “unfair labor practices” strike, and after isolating the striking workers for nearly a month, it pushed through a concessionary contract in January 2021.



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