

As Clarios strike ends second week:

Lessons of the 1984-1985 AP Parts strike in Toledo

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As 525 striking Clarios battery workers in Toledo, Ohio square off against the giant corporation and the sabotage of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy, it is important to recall another important struggle by auto parts workers in the city. Workers at AP Parts, members of UAW Local 14, walked out on May 2, 1984 after management imposed massive concessions, including a \$5.84 an hour pay cut, a nearly 50 percent wage cut, the elimination of 30-years-and-out pension rights as well as major regressive changes in work rules.

A few weeks later management escalated tensions by attempting to bring strikebreakers into the plant to resume production under the protection of police and the notorious Nuckols security firm. This provocation evoked an outpouring of anger in Toledo. Thousands of workers from factories in the area, including Jeep, Teledyne, Dana, Sun Oil and GM Hydromatic descended on the picket line to block the importation of scab labor, resulting in a pitched battle between strike supporters, police and security guards. Police fired tear gas and wooden bullets while workers responded in kind. A total of 41 strike supporters were arrested and numerous police vehicles damaged.

The assault on AP Parts workers took place in the midst of a ferocious nationwide assault on unionized workers spearheaded by President Ronald Reagan. Following the firing of 13,000 striking PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, sanctioned by the refusal of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to provide any concrete support, company after company began imposing massive wage cuts, locking out workers and importing strikebreakers. This included Phelps Dodge copper miners, Wilson Foods meatpackers, Greyhound bus drivers, AT Massey coal miners and many others.

The attack on AP Parts workers was supported and underwritten by the auto companies as part of their cost-cutting drive. After AP Parts imposed its wage-cutting contract, GM awarded the company a new \$30 million contract.

Following the mass picket at AP Parts, strikebreaking resumed under protection of a court injunction limiting picketing to four at the main gate and three at other gates.

One striker at the time told the *Bulletin* newspaper, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*, “If we go down, we will be the first domino in all these parts contracts that are coming up. That’s why they are out to break our union. These guys who were out here from the other plants know that.

“This plant used to be the best plant to work in in the state. Then they fired all their number one foremen and brought in these new guys. These guys were ‘blue slip’ happy. Three slips and you are out.”

In fact, hundreds of write-ups were issued and a number of workers fired. As an example of this new regime of intimidation, one worker was written up for singing on the job, something he had always done previously.

Another striker, Bill Richards said, “There were about 100 of us they were trying to screw out of our retirement. I worked here 29 years and would have had one year to go under 30-and-out. Under the new rules, I would have to work another 14 years before I could retire.”

The 1984 AP Parts strike lasted a record 285 days, the longest in Toledo history, and ended with the imposition of massive concessions. This was not because of lack of militancy on the part of the workers, but because of the sabotage by the UAW leadership, which after the initial outpouring of solidarity, worked might and main to prevent any such recurrence and isolate the strike.

Shortly after the mass picket at the plant, UAW President Owen Bieber called off a mass strike support rally that thousands of workers from around the US were planning to attend. He used as a justification the bogus claim that management had indicated a willingness to resume talks. The rally was never rescheduled.

Bieber never visited the AP Parts picket line and only once posed briefly with strikers at a protest outside the GM building in Detroit.

In a supposed solidarity visit to the AP Parts picket line later that summer by UAW Vice Presidents Donald Ephlin and Stephen Yokich, Ephlin said he did not want to give the workers “false hopes.” He dismissed as “nonsense” and “silly” any talk of a general strike to back the AP Parts workers.

Instead of mass actions, the UAW called a toothless consumer boycott of AP Parts muffler and tailpipes that had almost no impact. Meanwhile, Bieber said nothing about the fact the union allowed UAW members at the Toledo Jeep factory and other UAW-organized plants to continue handling scab parts.

The UAW did not even respond when 16 strikers were framed up on felony charges for the mass picket. The *Bulletin* reported that in December a judge “threatened to jail the local president after ruling that firewood and picket shacks maintained by strikers violated a May 24 injunction. The ruling followed the near unanimous 225-5 rejection of the company’s latest offer. A caravan of 50 workers from Detroit brought food for AP strikers.”

The treacherous role played by the UAW at the time is summarized by this report published by United Press International shortly after the mass picket at AP Parts in May. UAW Region 2B Director Joseph Tomasi describes relations with the company as “cordial” even as scabs took strikers’ jobs.

“As the city-mediated talks went on, non-union workers resumed full production for the first time since Monday at the AP Parts Co. UAW Region 2B Director Joseph Tomasi said the negotiations were focusing on six non-economic issues, including grievance procedures and seniority.

“‘The atmosphere has been cordial,’ Tomasi said. ‘We still have differences, but there have been no shouting matches.’ Mayor Donna

Owens had appointed a committee of five city leaders to coordinate negotiations and help resolve the strike by 450 members of UAW Local 14.

“‘We’re making some progress,’ committee member Mel Pelfrey said, who did not elaborate on the nature of the progress.”

Of course there was no “progress” as the strike continued for nine more months.

It is significant that the 1984 AP Parts strike, as in the present Clarios strike, took place on the eve of critical national contract talks with the Big Three automakers. The 1984 national auto contract resulted in significant concessions for Ford, Chrysler and General Motors workers as well as at Jeep, which then was under a separately negotiated agreement. The deal imposed a wage freeze and failed to win back any of the concessions given up in 1982.

Above all, the UAW bureaucracy feared that the AP Parts strike could unleash a tidal wave of anger that had built up over the previous concession contracts that had slashed workers’ living standards and allowed the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs.

The *Bulletin* called for the full mobilization of the working class behind the AP Parts strike and a ban on UAW members handling scab parts. The UAW leadership responded by launching a physical assault on a *Bulletin* reporter in the parking lot of UAW Local 14.

Not intimidated, the *Bulletin* demanded that the UAW denounce this attack on democratic rights, ultimately forcing UAW President Bieber to issue a statement opposing physical violence against opponents.

The 1984 auto contract had been prepared by the 1979 Chrysler concessions, at the time unprecedented. They marked the establishment of a new relationship between the UAW and management. Facing a declining membership, the UAW apparatus sought to shore up its finances by establishing ever more intimate relations with corporate management.

The 1984 agreement was a watershed in the history of the United Auto Workers and the American labor movement as a whole. In that agreement, the UAW inserted contract language officially adopting the policy of union-management “partnership,” establishing a series of corporatist union-management committees and joint programs.

In a first, the 1984 UAW-GM contract provided for the direct funneling of company funds to the UAW through the setting up of nonprofit companies administered jointly by UAW executives and management officials. These later expanded and evolved into the notorious joint training centers in the 1990s, through which literally billions of dollars were poured into the coffers of the UAW. Officials at the UAW-Chrysler training center, at one time headed by current UAW President Shawn Fain, were deeply implicated in the massive UAW corruption scandal of recent years that saw two former UAW presidents and numerous other officials sent to prison.

The corporatist degeneration of the UAW was part of a far broader global process that saw the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions all over the world abandon the defense of workers’ interests under the impact of globalization and adopt the program of unbridled union-management collaboration.

The isolation imposed by the UAW on the AP Parts strike eventually worked its result. Strikers lost their homes and cars and their life savings. Having taken the measure of the UAW, in February 1985 strikers reluctantly voted to accept an agreement that cut wages \$2-3 an hour, but kept the current pensions and gave partial amnesty to strikers victimized by management. The deal also imposed a divisive \$2 an hour cut for wages of new hires and imposed regressive changes in work rules.

Afterwards, the UAW bureaucracy tried to whitewash its own treacherous role. An article published in its misnamed *Solidarity* magazine was headlined “At AP Parts, Workers Savor a Sweet Victory.” It hailed the non-existent “gains” in the concession-riddled contract and failed to mention the massive May 21 solidarity rally that mobilized 4,500 workers

in support of the strike.

While spending a lot of ink to denouncing the role of Nuckols thugs, the UAW passed over the role of local politicians, some elected with UAW support, who oversaw the strikebreaking operation. This included Lucas County Prosecutor Anthony Pizza, a Democrat elected with union support, who had AP strikers and their supporters framed up as “felons.”

Finally, it was not through the efforts of the UAW apparatus, but the growing sentiment in the auto plants for direct action and a ban on handling of struck AP Parts components that convinced management to withdraw some of its most egregious demands and sign a contract.

It is well to recall that the AP Parts strike took place on the 50th Anniversary of the 1934 Toledo Auto Lite strike, a battle led by militant workers inspired by the ideas of socialism, that played a critical role in vast expansion of the mass industrial unions in the US. The workers prevailed by mobilizing the full power of the working class, including thousands of unemployed workers. The strike saw pitched battles in the streets with strike supporters battling police and Ohio National Guard troops.

The UAW long ago abandoned these traditions. In the years following the AP Parts strike the UAW oversaw a series of defeats of auto parts workers and the elimination of hundreds of thousands of autoworker jobs. This was the result of a deliberate policy to lower wages in the parts sector in order to lower the costs of the Big Three automakers and make them more “competitive” against their Japanese and European rivals.

In 1980, an auto parts worker earned only 15 percent lower wages than a worker at a Big Three assembly plant. Two decades later, the differential would rise to 31 percent. By the 1990s, the major automakers began the spinning off their own parts divisions, resulting in further massive attacks on workers. Pensions, cost of living and the 40-hour workweek were eliminated.

In the Clarios strike, newly installed UAW President Fain is following in the footsteps of Bieber and those before him in the UAW apparatus by isolating the workers. However, the critical lesson of AP Parts and the experiences of the 1980s is that isolated strikes cannot succeed against transnational corporations backed by the courts and police. All autoworkers must recognize the Clarios fight as their own fight.

In a call to action to rank-and-file workers to support the Clarios strike, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) stated:

This is the first stage in the contract fight of 150,000 Big Three autoworkers in the US and 23,000 in Canada. In this fight, the auto companies, the banks and the Biden administration are determined to carry out the transition to electric vehicles (EV) entirely at workers’ expense by slashing wages, cutting hundreds of thousands of jobs and devastating entire cities and towns. The contracts expire in September.

The outcome of the struggle at Clarios will determine the future course of events. It is therefore necessary that workers approach the strike strategically, as a critical battle in a broader war.

Clarios workers, who voted down the proposed contract by 98 percent, need more than words of support. They need acts of solidarity. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls on autoworkers to show their support by refusing to handle Clarios batteries at Big Three plants across the US and internationally.

There is a growing sentiment for broadening the struggle at Clarios, both nationally and globally. In recent days, Clarios workers in Germany have issued statements of support for their brother workers in Toledo. The same

issues that confront Clarios workers confront workers at Dana, at Jeep and across the auto industry.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is fighting to inform workers of the issues at stake at Clarios and mobilize broad support for the fight. A key lesson that must be taken from the record of betrayal of the UAW apparatus is the necessity for workers to take matters into their own hands, by organizing independent strike support committees to spread word of the strike, build broad support and fight for genuine solidarity actions to beat back the vicious attacks by management.

If you are interested in setting up a Clarios Strike Support Committee at your plant, fill out the form below.



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