

The rebellion at Clarios and the way forward

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On Monday, 525 striking autoworkers at the Clarios battery plant outside of Toledo, Ohio overwhelmingly rejected a second contract brought back by the United Auto Workers (UAW) apparatus by more than 75 percent.

The strike at Clarios is the first major contract battle of US autoworkers this year, and the defiance of Clarios workers sets the stage for explosive battles, including at the Big Three, where contracts for more than 170,000 workers in the US and Canada expire in September. In the face of soaring inflation and relentless demands for increased exploitation, workers are determined to fight.

Clarios workers initially walked out on May 8, a week-and-a-half after they rejected by 98 percent the first contract brought back to them by UAW Local 12. Over the past two weeks, corporate management, backed by the state, has sought to browbeat workers into submission. Clarios hired strikebreakers, shifted production to other plants, cut workers off their health care and obtained a court injunction limiting picketing.

The UAW apparatus, now under the leadership of newly elected President Shawn Fain, has played a critical role in assisting management in its efforts to break the strike. The apparatus has done nothing to inform other workers of the strike, let alone mobilize broader support behind it and stop the handling of scab batteries.

On Monday, it tried to ram through the second agreement in a shotgun vote. As was routine under former President Ray Curry, workers were not even given the full contract, instead only receiving self-serving “highlights” presented to them on the same day they voted.

The issues at stake in the Clarios strike are common to all workers. In both the original contract rejected in late April and in the “new” contract rejected on Monday, workers would receive a 3 percent wage increase annually over the course of the contract. At present rates of inflation, this would mean a real wage cut of more than 10 percent. Management has also made changes in piece rates that have cut wages for many workers by as much as \$10 an hour.

One of the most significant issues in the strike is the

company’s attempt to impose a new “2-2-3” schedule (two days on, two days off, three days on; etc.) with 12-hour work days and no overtime. This is the latest move by the ruling class to abolish the eight-hour day, won by workers through bitter struggles more than a century ago. The UAW claimed that it was limiting the extent of the new work hours in the second contract, but the agreement in fact would pave the way for its full implementation.

Clarios workers are increasingly aware that if they were to accept such a rotten contract, it would not only severely impact their own lives, but would set a precedent for the contract struggles later this year. “[Workers at the Big Three] are supporting us,” one Clarios worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “and we can’t turn our backs on them. If we bend, that will open the gates for GM, Ford and Stellantis. We’re not going to let that happen.”

In the course of the strike, workers have also come to understand their own power as part of a broader international class movement. “It is obvious now how essential we are,” another worker said on Monday, “not just workers inside the US borders but around the world. All of us, from France to Mexico, we are the working class. All over the world, people are waking up to the reality that everything is in our hands, and we have the power to take it.”

Workers, however, can be under no illusion that just by rejecting the contract they can compel the UAW apparatus to negotiate something better. Rather, the apparatus will respond as it has at Volvo Trucks, Caterpillar, Deere, CNH and countless other struggles: It will attempt to isolate and wear down the workers and have them vote again until they “get it right.”

Clarios has behind it the entire ruling class. It is a giant transnational corporation that, under a myriad of brands in different countries, produces one in three car batteries. Its management and board of directors are staffed by representatives of the Big Three auto companies and other major corporations. The company is itself owned by the Canadian-based private equity firm Brookfield Business

Partners.

The ruling class sees a defeat of Clarios workers as essential not only to impose similar massive concessions at the Big Three but as a necessary component of the restructuring of the industry as automakers transition to electric vehicles. In its competition with China and other countries over the EV market, the American ruling class in particular is determined to impose mass layoffs and wage cuts on battery workers and other autoworkers.

Behind corporate management, moreover, stands the Biden administration and the entire political establishment. The ruling elite is seeking to force workers to pay for the massive expenditures on war and the bailout of the banks through the intensification of exploitation. In the current “negotiations” over the debt limit, the Democrats and Republicans agree on trillions of dollars in cuts to social programs, even as unlimited resources are made available to finance the escalating US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine.

Within this framework, the role of the UAW apparatus is to act as a police force over the working class. The experience at Clarios demonstrates that this has not changed one iota with the election of Fain, with all his pledges to “reform” the UAW and make it more “democratic.” In fact, Fain received only 3 percent of the vote of rank-and-file workers in a fraudulent and anti-democratic election characterized by deliberate and systematic vote suppression.

Over the past two weeks, Fain did not make an appearance on the picket lines. But he did travel to Washington D.C. before the strike began, where he engaged in behind-the-scenes discussions over how the UAW apparatus will beat back what Fain previously called the “unreasonable expectations” of autoworkers this year.

During the UAW election last year, rank-and-file socialist worker Will Lehman ran on a program of abolishing the UAW apparatus and transferring power to workers on the shop floor. Lehman insisted that there would be no change in the role of the apparatus through a rearrangement of the personnel of the bureaucracy, consisting of a highly privileged stratum of the upper-middle class that lives off workers’ dues money and benefits from their exploitation. Workers have to take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees controlled by the workers and independent of the UAW apparatus.

Critically, Lehman called for the international unity of the working class in a common struggle, through the

building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In its statement last week, the IWA-RFC explained, “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.”

In this war, the Clarios workers have beaten back an effort at sabotage. But to press the offensive, they need the support of workers throughout the US and around the world.

The *World Socialist Web Site* endorses the call by the IWA-RFC for the establishment of Clarios Strike Support Committees to spread information about the strike and inform workers of what is at stake. An urgent appeal must be made to Clarios workers at the 18 facilities the company operates in the US—including in Michigan, North Carolina, Texas, Missouri, Iowa and South Carolina—for a united fight.

The IWA-RFC is fighting to break the blackout on the strike by alerting Clarios workers throughout the world, including at the company’s European headquarters in Hanover, Germany. Workers throughout Europe and in Mexico, China, South Korea, Brazil and other countries must be informed about the struggle of their brothers and sisters in the US and encouraged to take solidarity action.

Among the Big Three autoworkers, rank-and-file workers should organize discussions and raise the demand to stop production involving the use of scab batteries, which is helping the company in its effort to break the strike. All autoworkers, along with workers in every other industry and sector, must do everything they can to inform their fellow workers about the struggle at Clarios and mobilize support.

To build Clarios Strike Support Committees and help expand the strike, fill out the form below.



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