

As Clarios strike reaches one month, growing threat of UAW sabotage

Marcus Day
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Thursday marks one month since approximately 525 Clarios battery workers in Holland, Ohio, near Toledo, began a strike that holds immense significance for workers throughout the auto industry and beyond. Throughout their strike, Clarios workers have demonstrated considerable determination, resilience and courage, standing up to corporate threats and strikebreaking efforts, including the termination of their health insurance, the use of scabs and court injunctions.

The strikers are taking a stand not just for themselves, but for the working class as a whole and the next generation. Clarios workers have seen their pay and working conditions worsen for years, while the company has reaped gigantic profits, including \$1.6 billion last year alone.

In comments on the picket lines, the strikers have conveyed a sense of their vast potential power and the international dimensions of their fight. When other workers have learned of the strike—primarily through the reporting of the WSWS, which has sought to cut through the media blackout—they have responded with enthusiastic support and pointed to the commonality of the problems faced by workers. “It’s the same everywhere; it’s about them ‘up there’ wanting to take everything and give nothing,” a Clarios worker in Hanover, Germany said.

Management, backed by the Big Three auto companies and Wall Street, has responded by digging in its heels, attempting to introduce a “2-2-3” schedule that would make 12-hour workdays permanent and eliminate overtime pay after eight hours. The company has offered an insulting 3 percent wage increase, an effective pay cut with inflation, which remains near 5 percent.

As in every serious social struggle, the battle lines have become increasingly clear as the strike has progressed. What has emerged is that workers face a war on two fronts: against the corporation, but also against the treacherous, pro-corporate bureaucracy that controls the United Auto Workers union (UAW).

In the present situation, the most dangerous mistake would be for workers to adopt a “wait and see” attitude towards the next agreement being worked out between the UAW and Clarios. It will inevitably reveal itself to be virtually unchanged from the two deals workers already rejected.

The unavoidable conclusions are the following: As long as control of the strike remains in the hands of the UAW bureaucracy, it will be led to defeat and the imposition of the company’s demands. This must not be allowed to happen.

In order for Clarios workers’ sacrifices over the past month to not

have been in vain, it is urgently necessary to expand the strike and break it out of its isolation. The Clarios Workers Rank-and-File Committee, a significant initial step towards workers’ self-organization of the struggle, must be built and connections forged with workers throughout the Big Three auto plants.

Rank-and-file Clarios workers should organize to send delegations to plants such as Toledo Jeep Assembly and the Detroit-area auto plants, in order to make a direct appeal for support and common action from the Big Three workers, including the refusal to handle scab-made batteries. Autoworkers at other Clarios plants and the Big Three companies should themselves form Clarios Strike Support Committees to campaign for such measures.

It should be recalled that in 2019, workers at the GM manufacturing complex in Silao, Mexico, refused company demands for speedup and additional production during the strike by 49,000 GM workers in the US. This elementary act of international class solidarity was undertaken by the GM workers in Mexico at considerable risk to their jobs and safety.

How the UAW bureaucracy has been working to sabotage the strike

Behind workers’ backs, UAW Local 12 and the UAW International have now sought to force through two sellout contracts dictated by management. Workers, however, have responded with remarkable defiance and unity, voting down the first UAW-endorsed deal by 98 percent on April 27, and rejecting the second by 76 percent on May 22.

The UAW apparatus, under the new self-proclaimed “reform” administration of President Shawn Fain, has responded to these rebukes not by bending to workers’ demands, but rather by accelerating their efforts to sabotage and betray the strike. That is the only plausible explanation for the actions of the union bureaucracy in recent days.

Over the weekend, UAW Local 598 officials at the General Motors Flint, Michigan plant informed workers that they are instructed to handle scab-produced batteries from the Ohio Clarios plant, under orders from the UAW International. The direction came despite growing calls by Big Three autoworkers to implement a ban on accepting supplies produced by company strikebreakers.

Then on Monday, it was revealed that Clarios is ramping up output at its St. Joseph, Missouri plant, imposing mandatory overtime this

coming weekend. This is a blatant effort to diminish the impact of the strike. The increase in production has been accepted by both the IUE-CWA, the union at the Missouri plant, as well as the UAW, according to *Automotive News*. An IUE-CWA official told the publication that their UAW counterparts had made no appeals for them to reject the additional work.

In other words, the IUE-CWA and the UAW bureaucracies are in a de facto alliance with the company in its strikebreaking operations.

Fearing blowback from workers, Clarios claimed on Wednesday that the ramp-up of production at the St. Joseph plant was “unrelated” to the strike, telling local media in Missouri that mandatory overtime this weekend was “part of our normal 24-hour, 7-day per week production process.” But no one should take such statements at face value, given that the company has an obvious interest in seeking to defuse anger among workers at the St. Joseph plant over potentially being used to undermine the strike in Ohio.

Under Fain and other Unite All Workers for Democracy-backed union officers, as well as Region 2B Director Dave Green—all sworn into office at the end of March—the UAW apparatus has been working to isolate and betray the Clarios strike just as systematically and ruthlessly as their corrupt, bribed predecessors in the Administration Caucus.

The UAW has carried out a near-total blackout of the Clarios strike, making no mention of it during the union-wide online town hall last week. Similarly, union officials have kept workers at Clarios in the dark as to the contents of the contract talks. When the UAW announced its tentative agreements with the company, it presented workers with selective “highlights” at ratification meetings and forced them to vote immediately.

All of these actions fly in the face of the pious and hypocritical claims of Fain and Co. to be instituting a new era of “transparency” and “democracy” in the UAW. Also exposed are groups such as Labor Notes and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose members have been elevated to top positions in the UAW apparatus. Labor Notes, the DSA and affiliated publications such as *Jacobin* magazine have all but entirely blacked out the strike.

The response of the UAW bureaucracy to the Clarios strike is a further confirmation that its policies are not fundamentally altered or determined by the shuffling of individuals at the top, but rather by what the UAW apparatus is *as an institution* and its objective social function within capitalist society. For decades, the UAW bureaucracy has functioned as a bulwark for the ruling class, allowing the auto companies to decimate workers’ jobs and living standards.

In his election campaign for UAW president last year, rank-and-file worker Will Lehman called not for a change in the personnel of the apparatus, but its abolition, with power transferred to workers on the shop floor. Despite systematic voter suppression—most workers did not even know an election was being held—Lehman won broad support from workers who have a long and bitter experience being sold out. This support must now be translated into concrete action and organization.

Build rank-and-file committees to prepare an international counteroffensive by the working class!

Many workers at Clarios may be asking themselves: Why is the

company taking such a hard line? With all the profits they’ve made, can’t they afford to concede a little to us?

The answer lies in the broader context within which the strike is taking place. The auto companies are engaged in a race to transition to electric vehicles, seeking to dominate the new EV markets and technologies and undercut their rivals. To fund this transition while maintaining their bloated profits, the corporations are planning to go on a job- and cost-cutting offensive that will make the 2009 auto restructuring pale by comparison.

Simultaneously, the financial oligarchy in every major capitalist country is seeking to make the working class pay for a growing economic crisis, as well as the gargantuan sums which are being expended on war against Russia and military buildup against China.

But another, countervailing process is emerging. The Clarios strike is part of a growing upsurge of class struggle among autoworkers and workers around the world. In Michigan, 160 Constellium workers, who supply aluminum components to Ford, have been on strike for more than three weeks. At the University of Washington, 2,400 academic workers, also members of the UAW, went on strike Wednesday. In September, the contracts for 170,000 Big Three autoworkers in the US and Canada expire.

Beyond the US, strikes by tens of thousands have roiled the UK, France, Germany, Spain and other European countries in recent months, as workers seek to fight back against staggering inflation and demands that they sacrifice to fund the US-NATO war against Russia.

The critical tasks are to unify the struggles of workers on a global scale and arm them with an international strategy and perspective. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting for such a program, working from the outset of the Clarios strike to inform and mobilize workers throughout the auto industry, and to assist workers in developing rank-and-file committees to transfer power and decision making to the shop floor.

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