

UAW President Shawn Fain falsely touts “massive gains” as his administration sells out Clarios and other strikes

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On Friday, United Auto Workers Local 12 and the UAW International headquarters rammed through a pro-company contract at Clarios, the world’s largest automotive battery maker, after having starved and isolated approximately 500 workers on the picket lines in Holland, Ohio, for nearly six weeks.

The tentative agreement UAW officials put before workers on Friday was virtually identical to the deals they had overwhelmingly rejected twice before, by 75 percent on May 22 and by 98 percent on April 27. The contract contains only a 3 percent annual wage increase, entailing a substantial real wage cut with inflation, and opens the door to a grueling “2-2-3” schedule with 12-hour workdays without overtime after eight hours.

Clarios workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* over the weekend stressed their disgust and anger with the UAW’s sellout of their struggle. Many workers, however, felt they had no choice but to vote to accept the agreement, since they faced the continued isolation of their strike by the UAW apparatus and the growing threat of destitution from the union’s poverty-level strike pay.

“They never wanted us to go on strike, they just wanted us to lay down and take it from them,” one worker explained. “The union bureaucracy pushed us to go back to work, they starved us out till we had to go back. No one can live off \$500 a week. We all have homes.

“We had a false leadership,” he continued. “They did nothing to support us. Twenty years ago, they wouldn’t have let scab batteries go into Jeep and other plants. But they didn’t do anything to stop it. The union is telling us, ‘Wait, in three years’ time, we’ll get the big money for you.’ That’s crap, if you didn’t get it now, you’re not going to get it in three years.”

An entirely different picture of the UAW’s actions was also presented on Friday, in a Facebook Live address by President Shawn Fain. Beginning the event with curt references to tentative agreements “secured” at Clarios and elsewhere, Fain said, “Those of you holding the line out there, I want you to know, your International union has your back 100 percent.”

Later, Fain went so far as to claim that the UAW had won “successes” and even “massive gains” for workers at Clarios, Constellium, the University of Washington and elsewhere, stating, “You know, we are changing the narrative.”

Behind Fain’s “narrative,” the reality is that within the space of

a few days, the UAW apparatus moved to shut down a number of significant strikes and push through contracts on management’s terms.

•On Friday, the UAW also ended the month-long strike by 160 Constellium aluminum parts workers in Van Buren Township, Michigan. A Constellium worker told the WSWS that the deal contained wage increases of 6 percent, 5 percent and 4 percent in the three years of the contract, barely above the current rate of inflation, which will leave workers’ wages stagnant at best. Roughly a third of workers voted against the deal, the worker said, with many thinking “we should have gotten more money due to the cost of inflation.”

•On June 15, the UAW shut down a strike by 2,400 academic workers—post-docs, research scientists and engineers—at the University of Washington following the announcement of tentative agreements for the bargaining units, before workers even had the chance to vote on the deal. Voting on the contracts began on Sunday.

In recent weeks, the UAW has also pushed through deals among Sherwin-Williams paint workers in Maryland, where 30 workers had been on strike since last November, and Faurecia auto parts workers in Saline, Michigan.

The experience of the workers at Faurecia, like that of the Clarios workers, is particularly revealing of the contradiction between the militant-sounding rhetoric of Fain’s administration and the reality of its anti-democratic, pro-corporate actions.

Workers at the Faurecia plant, who produce plastic interior parts for the major automakers, initially voted to reject a UAW tentative agreement by 80 percent on May 11. The company and the union bureaucracy responded to this act of defiance by slashing the signing bonus from \$3,500 to \$2,500 in the second tentative agreement, a Faurecia worker told the WSWS, seeking to intimidate workers into accepting the deal. The second agreement reportedly passed with a questionable margin of 51.72 percent in favor and 48.28 percent opposed.

“Changing the narrative”

It has taken less than three months for UAW President Shawn Fain and his administration after being sworn into office to demonstrate conclusively where they stand: on the side of the corporations and opposed to the interests of the workers they claim to represent.

After decades of concessions and job cuts enforced by the UAW leadership, there is growing unrest and opposition among rank-and-file workers, with workers launching an increasing number of strikes to win major improvements to wages and working conditions.

In this context, Fain and the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) caucus, which now heads the union apparatus, are continuing the methods of their predecessors: isolating strikes, keeping workers on poverty-level strike pay, forcing workers into snap votes where only selective “highlights” of contracts are distributed, and overall using lies and intimidation by local, regional and national-level union officials.

The assigned role of Fain and the UAWD has been to provide a facelift to the discredited UAW apparatus, following a years-long, sprawling corruption scandal which sent two former UAW presidents and roughly a dozen other top union officials to prison. Tighter control over the UAW membership is an imperative for both the auto corporations and the ruling class as a whole, given the contract expirations for 150,000 Ford, General Motors and Stellantis workers in September, as well as 20,000 Big Three autoworkers in Canada.

In recent weeks, Fain’s administration—including pseudo-left Democratic Party operatives such as Jonah Furman, the UAW’s new communications director—have launched a PR blitz, with highly produced videos declaring the UAW leadership is “back in the fight” and seeking to win a “just transition” to electric vehicles for workers. The corporate media, for its part, has uncritically repeated Fain’s claims to be carrying out a drastic overhaul of the UAW apparatus and preparing a militant showdown with the Big Three automakers.

“We’re in the process of changing the culture of this union, from a reactionary defensive union, to an aggressive and offensive-minded union over the last 60 days,” Fain stated during his Facebook Live address, saying that the UAW would be conducting “contract campaigns” to supposedly prepare rank-and-file workers for a decisive struggle against the Big Three automakers.

The changes being implemented by Fain & Co., however, are fundamentally cosmetic and rhetorical. In a leaked memo in March, Fain’s campaign warned that it would have to overcome workers’ “unrealistic expectations” for major increases in wages and benefits.

The most revealing element of Fain’s Facebook event was his hostile response to a series of questions posed by Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker who ran for UAW president last year. Lehman asked in the comments of the stream:

Why are UAW representatives undermining the strike of Clarios workers by forcing workers at other UAW represented plants to handle batteries made by scabs? Why is the UAW not expanding the strike? Clarios workers need

full pay while they’re out on strike. You make over \$5,000 a week off our dues while they’re out on \$500 a week trying to fight.

Fain began by seeking to evade the question of why workers were only paid \$500 a week out of the union’s \$825 million strike fund, stating,

When we talk about strikes, naturally you know there’s this debate about strike pay and how much money we have in the strike fund and striking in general and as I said before that’s going to be up to the companies you know and how they react. I mean as profitable as these companies have been there’s no excuse we continue to regress as workers. And at the end of the day we have to do what we have to do to get there. And it’s going to come down to a matter of the will of this membership and this leadership.

Shortly after, Fain changed tack, grotesquely implying that workers who questioned the inadequacy of the UAW’s strike pay were essentially greedy, saying: “Look at the founders of this union, when this union began. They weren’t worried about strike pay. Um, you know conditions were bad. They did whatever the hell they had to do to get there.”

Coming from an individual who has earned more than a million dollars in workers’ dues over the course of his career climbing the ladder of the union, and who now receives an annual salary of roughly a quarter of a million, such statements are utterly hypocritical.

The sellout of the Clarios strike under the UAW’s new administration bears important lessons and a warning for all autoworkers. The UAW bureaucracy under Fain retains its essential pro-corporate and nationalist character, working to impose the demands of the companies and suppress the resistance of workers. No amount of “pressure” on this massive apparatus will change these facts.

The urgent task is to build and expand the network of militant workers’ organizations—the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees—in order to transfer all power and decision-making out of the hands of the bureaucracy and into the hands of workers in every factory and workplace.

“We went back on management’s terms, not ours,” the Clarios worker told the WSWS. “But this is a never-ending battle. The corporations are coming together, trying to squash us. The only way we can change that is if all of us get together and shut everything down.”



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