

Clarios workers return to work, angered over UAW sellout of their strike

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More than 500 Clarios workers in Holland, Ohio returned to work late Sunday and Monday for the first time since the end of their 40-day strike at the Toledo-area auto battery manufacturing plant. Their powerful walkout was ended after United Auto Workers Local 12 and UAW International officials pushed through a concessions-laden contract, which workers had decisively rejected two times before.

Clarios workers who spoke to the WSWS described the conditions when they returned to work Monday. One worker who spoke to the WSWS at length explained, “When we came back, the plant manager was at the gate, welcoming us, giving high fives and passing out coffee and donuts. I don’t know what’s worse, the company retaliating against us or being too nice while they stick us with this rotten contract. They’re going to be working a lot of us 12 hours a day, with no overtime. I always say, if they could get away with it, they wouldn’t pay us anything. All they care about is the bottom line.”

During the work stoppage, Clarios had brought in strikebreakers and management personnel and shifted production to other plants in the US and Mexico to fill orders for GM, Ford, Stellantis and other automakers. Although this produced widespread opposition from rank-and-file autoworkers, the UAW International, led by new President Shawn Fain, gave the auto companies a green light to use batteries produced by scab labor.

Clarios workers took a courageous stand against the world’s largest auto battery manufacturer, but their struggle was sabotaged by the UAW bureaucracy. Despite its rhetoric about the “new, democratic UAW,” the Fain administration resorted to the same dirty tricks as its predecessors to push through a pro-company contract. This included starving workers out with \$500 a week in strike pay, releasing phony “highlights” instead of the full contract, and forcing workers to vote on the same contract three times until it passed.

In a livestreamed event Friday, Fain falsely claimed that Clarios workers and other UAW members at Constellium and the University of Washington—whose strikes were also shut

down by the UAW bureaucracy—had won “massive gains.” In fact, the new three-year deal at Clarios includes an insulting 3 percent annual wage increase and allows the company to introduce a new 2-2-3 work schedule with 12-hour workdays and no overtime payments.

“When we got there at 6 a.m. Monday, the place was a disaster,” the Clarios worker continued. “Trash was overflowing where the scabs had been working in the formation and shipping departments and no one cleaned up. They said the supervisors ‘tidied up a bit, if they had time.’”

“We were told that the scabs did not have access to our uniforms. That was a lie. They broke in and stole our boots and our tools. All the scabs are gone, except for UAW members who crossed the picket line. They’ve still got all their seniority and UAW rights and didn’t face any consequences for crossing the picket lines. That’s BS, if you ask me.”

The worker continued: “Growing up, you thought getting a UAW job was the best thing ever, that you would get a pension and retire in comfort. I used to be proud to be a UAW worker at Johnson Controls [which ran the Holland plant before Johnson Controls spun off its battery division in 2015]. You worked hard but you knew you were part of something bigger. Now I can’t stand being a Clarios employee, there is so much anxiety. This company runs off our blood, sweat and tears treats us like slaves.

“The guys are also taking bets on how many workers are going to quit after they get their bonus checks. The company wants to get rid of the higher-paid workers and replace us with low-paid employees. We used to give them 120-150 percent every day. They will be lucky if they get 80 percent from us now. We’re not robots, we’re people with bills and families.

“They already lost Ford’s aftermarket batteries and could lose the original equipment batteries too. GM is also building its own batteries. If something happens and Clarios tries to close this plant, nobody would ever take over the property because it is so contaminated with lead and other toxic chemicals. If that is going on in the ground, can you imagine what is going on in our bodies?”

Pointing to the toll on workers’ health and lives, he explained, “In the more than a decade I’ve worked here, I’ve seen so many people die. It’s usually right after or right before

they retire. We work with lead, acid, asbestos and other deadly chemicals, 12 hours a day. But, according to the company, we're not allowed to make a decent living even though these jobs are literally killing us.

"I give props to my brothers and sisters at Ford, Jeep and the other plants. They're hardworking like we are but they haven't worked in a battery factory. We wear PPE and shower and change clothes after work every day because we might bring lead home and expose our families. We have no air conditioning. We have horrible conditions and are not getting paid for it."

"All UAW members should be on strike at once"

The worker voiced his support for a common struggle by all autoworkers in the US and workers internationally. "The Big Three workers are preparing for a strike this summer. We will have their backs. In fact, all UAW members should be on strike at once. The money-greedy corporations are the root of all evil. Workers will never be treated humanely in a system that is only concerned with the bottom line. Workers across the world should stop working. What would the companies do without us? Honestly, being a billionaire should be a no-no. They should only be allowed to make a certain amount and the rest should go to the workers. Clarios made \$9 billion in revenues last year, and they claim they can't pay their employees across the world a decent wage."

The worker then reviewed the treacherous role of the UAW bureaucracy during the Clarios strike. "If you sit here and claim the UAW supports its members, then you should have experienced what we did in this strike. I was very proud of my Clarios brothers and sisters who stood up to the company. But the UAW International threw us under the bus. I have an issue with the new president Shawn Fain and the UAW leaders telling the Big Three that they could use batteries made by scab labor at our plant. These officials need to be put in their place. We can't let the UAW officials throw the GM, Ford and Stellantis workers under the bus like they did us. Workers have to be prepared for this, and make sure it doesn't happen.

"I want to give some advice to Big Three autoworkers facing their own contract struggle this September. I would advise them not to believe a word that comes out of the UAW officials' mouths. They forced us to accept a 3 percent raise, which was a slap in the face after all the pay cuts we took.

"The union boasted they reduced the wage progression from seven to four years. But workers should get top pay in two years or less. I started out making \$15-16 an hour more than 10 years ago. Now they're starting out at \$13. What's next—\$11 an hour? McDonald's is paying \$16. Why put your health and your body on the line here?"

"They brought the same contract back to us three times until it got passed. All they did was change a little wording. Now we're stuck with this contract for three years. They tell us we can't break the contract when they break it all the time. That's what they did when they cut our pay twice by increasing the quotas that we need to hit to get our hourly pay increased. Some of us were making \$35 an hour and they cut us to \$24. Then they cut us to \$18.06 an hour. But the union said we couldn't strike even when workers were losing up to \$15 an hour.

"During the informational meetings, the UAW officials were saying if we voted this down again, Clarios was going to close the shop for 30 days, fire us all, and then rehire anybody that would come to work. Workers can't let them hold a gun to our heads. If the UAW officials threaten your jobs, don't fall for it. Stand up and fight the companies and the union.

"In the more than 10 years I worked for Johnson Controls and Clarios, I never saw the union do a damn thing to protect workers. You go to the union, thinking they could help, and all you get is, 'No, I can't help you.' The union is made up of yes men for the companies.

"My advice to autoworkers is band together outside of the UAW. Talk with each other and organize. Don't let the UAW officials push you around. Get together by yourselves and don't rely on the shop stewards, the plant chairman or any other UAW officials.

"If you have to stand up against your own union, then you have to do it. During the strike, workers built a rank-and-file committee to fight for what we needed. We need to build these rank-and-file committees in all the plants so we can represent and fight for ourselves."

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