

The Clarios strike and its lessons for the working class

Jerry White
20 June 2023

More than 500 Clarios workers in Holland, Ohio returned to work this week after the end of their 40-day strike against the world's largest auto battery manufacturer. The United Auto Workers bureaucracy shut down the powerful struggle over the weekend after pushing through a pro-company agreement that included a cut in real wages and introduced a new 12-hour workday without overtime.

On two prior occasions, Clarios workers overwhelmingly rejected essentially the same proposal, first by 98 percent on April 27 and then by 76 percent on May 22. Confronting a full-scale revolt by the rank and file, the UAW apparatus set out systematically to crush the strike. It kept workers strung out on \$500-a-week strike benefits, provided aid and comfort to the company's strikebreaking operations, and threatened the defiant workers with the prospect of being replaced by scabs without any resistance from the UAW if they voted down the contract again.

The same week that the UAW apparatus pushed through the deal to end the Clarios strike, it shut down the month-long strike by 160 workers at Ford supplier Constellium in suburban Detroit, sent 2,400 academic workers back to work at the University of Washington before they could vote on their contract, and sold out the six-month strike by Sherwin-Williams paint workers in Maryland. This followed the announcement by the UAW that auto parts workers at the Forvia (formerly Faurecia) plant in Saline, Michigan had accepted a concessions contract by a suspicious 51.72 to 48.28 percent margin, after initially voting it down by 80 percent on May 11.

With the contracts for 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers expiring in less than three months, the UAW bureaucracy is desperately trying to put out local fires before they coalesce into a raging blaze against the corporations and their stooges in the UAW apparatus.

The betrayal of the Clarios strike shows what workers at

the Detroit Three auto companies will face unless they take matters into their own hands. There are critical lessons that must be learned by all workers from the experience of the Clarios strike.

First, there is the role of the entire union apparatus, not just the UAW and not just in the US, in suppressing the class struggle and imposing the dictates of the corporations.

Despite the rhetoric about "restoring democracy" and "returning power to the members," the new administration in the UAW, led by President Shawn Fain, is no less a tool of corporate management than its predecessors.

Fain, a longtime UAW bureaucrat, was put in place through a rigged election to put a new face on the gangsters in Solidarity House. But no amount of Facebook videos produced by the pseudo-left spin doctors Fain has brought onto his staff from *Labor Notes* and the Democratic Socialists of America can hide the fact that the UAW apparatus as a *social force* remains entirely hostile to the interests of rank-and-file autoworkers.

The interests of this apparatus, comprised of individuals making incomes that place them in the top 5 or even 1 percent of the population, are entirely divorced from and opposed to the strivings of workers everywhere to combat soaring inflation and ever more brutal working conditions. The union apparatus was critical in forcing through a rail contract last year, in attempting to ram through an agreement on the docks, and in isolating every strike they could not prevent from happening.

Second, the ruling class, and in particular the Biden administration in the US, is relying on the union apparatus to subordinate workers to its conflict with its major competitors abroad and its escalating war in Ukraine. As far as the ruling class is concerned, the full cost of the US-NATO war against Russia and the plans for war against China must be paid for through increased exploitation at

home.

In recent weeks, Fain and other UAW officials have repeatedly met with officials from the Biden administration and members of Congress, who are pushing for the transition to electric vehicles as a means to challenge Chinese dominance in EV production and develop a nationally based supply chain, which is required for a wartime economy. To carry this out, the White House is further integrating the UAW and other unions into its plans to suppress internal opposition and sharply reduce labor costs, particularly in the new electric vehicle assembly and battery plants.

Third, workers want to fight back and are beginning to take matters into their own hands. Autoworkers, like their counterparts in other industries in the US and around the world, are striving to coordinate their struggles across corporations and national borders. To achieve this, workers need an entirely new strategy and organizational framework so that decision-making and power can be transferred from the pro-company UAW apparatus to the workers on the shop floor.

In the course of the strike, a group of Clarios workers formed the Clarios Workers Rank-and-File Committee and published an open letter, which outlined their own demands and appealed to workers at the Big Three auto companies for joint action to win the strike. The workers established connections with other autoworkers in the US and internationally, within the framework of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Workers at GM, Ford and Stellantis factories only learned about this decisive struggle due to the efforts of the *World Socialist Web Site* and autoworker rank-and-file committees in Toledo, Detroit, Flint and other cities, which broke the information blackout imposed by the UAW bureaucracy. As a result, workers demanded that the UAW carry out a ban on the handling of batteries built by scab labor at the Clarios plant.

Through the work of the rank-and-file committees, striking workers also established direct contact with other Clarios workers, including at the battery plant in St. Joseph, Missouri, where the company was increasing the production of batteries to undermine the impact of the strike. Although the Missouri workers wanted to refuse the extra work, their own union, the IUE-CWA, had accepted it after consultations with the UAW. Workers also learned that both unions were concealing an elaborate scheme by Clarios to use plastic battery casings from the Missouri plant on the batteries completed by scabs in

Ohio to conceal their origins.

The IWA-RFC also helped establish direct lines of communication between strikers in Ohio and the 11,000 Clarios workers in the company's global operations, including at the heart of the company's European operations in Hanover, Germany.

The revolt by the Clarios workers is part of growing movement of the working class throughout the world against the efforts of the ruling class to impose the costs of the economic crisis and the war on the backs of workers. This includes mass strikes and protests against pension cuts in France, strikes by postal, health care, railway and airline workers in the UK, Germany, Italy and other European countries, strikes by dockworkers and subway workers in Argentina, and protests against IMF privatization and austerity measures in Sri Lanka.

On May 17, the IWA-RFC issued a statement, "A call to action to rank-and-file autoworkers: Mobilize support for the Clarios strike!" which stated that the strike was "the first stage in the contract fight of 150,000 Big Three autoworkers in the US and 23,000 in Canada."

The statement continued: "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." It is therefore necessary, the statement continued, that workers "approach the strike strategically, as a critical battle in a broader war."

The Clarios strike was a strategic experience for the entire working class. The outcome of this struggle can be turned from a negative to a positive if workers draw the fundamental lessons from this fight and build up a powerful rank-and-file movement against the corporatist union bureaucracies and the system of capitalist exploitation which they defend.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)