

# Tenneco spark plug workers vote down second UAW agreement as more US auto parts contracts set to expire

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27 June 2023

*Work at Tenneco? We want to hear from you: Tell us what you think about the contract proposals and what your working conditions are like.*

Workers at the Tenneco spark plug plant in Cambridge, Ohio, have voted for a second time to reject a sellout contract negotiated by the United Auto Workers. The workers in Cambridge, along with workers at a sister plant in Burlington, Iowa, are currently working under an extension of the old contract that expired in March.

The Tenneco contract is only one among more than a dozen parts plants under the UAW that are up for negotiation this year, while some 150,000 workers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis head into contract talks this summer. Decades of concessions have seen the pay and conditions of auto parts workers deteriorate drastically, dropping far below the already depressed rates paid for comparable work at auto assembly plants.

Earlier this month the UAW forced through a sellout deal on 500 striking workers at the Clarios battery plant in Holland, Ohio, virtually identical to two earlier UAW-backed deals workers had overwhelmingly voted down. The contract included below-inflation 3 percent pay raises and opened the door to mandatory 12-hour shifts without the payment of overtime after eight hours.

A group of militant workers at the plant had formed the Clarios Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight against the collusion of UAW officials with management and to appeal to other workers for common action in support of the strike.

The betrayal of the Clarios strike by the UAW bureaucracy and the imposition of the company's terms has been a swift demonstration of the continuation of the UAW's pro-corporate policies under the self-declared "reform" administration of President Shawn Fain. Fearful of the possibility of the strike spreading and eliciting a broader rebellion, the UAW apparatus under Fain used all of its well-worn dirty tricks to break the strike—isolating the struggle to just the Ohio plant, starving workers on inadequate strike pay, making them vote on limited contract "highlights," and, worst of all, ordering locals at Big Three plants to continue handling scab-produced batteries.

The same week the UAW bureaucracy shut down a strike by about 160 workers at auto parts maker Constellium in Van Buren Township, Michigan outside Detroit. About 30 percent of the workers voted "no" because of pay raises that barely matched inflation. Last month, the UAW reported a contract passed at the Forvia (formerly Faurecia) parts plant in Saline, Michigan, by a suspiciously close margin of 51.72 to 48.28 percent, after the workers initially voted it down by 80 percent on May 11.

Workers at the Tenneco plant in Cambridge, Ohio (about midway between Columbus and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) produce the ceramic parts for spark plugs. There are about 80 workers left at the plant. About 400 workers are employed at the Burlington operation.

The plants used to be owned by Champion Spark Plugs, then were acquired by Cooper, and then by Federal-Mogul before coming under Tenneco.

Tenneco emerged as a standalone company in 1999 from the breakup of a larger conglomerate. Late last year a group of banks led by Bank of America and Citigroup funded hedge fund Apollo Global Management's \$6 billion acquisition of Tenneco. According to the company website, "Tenneco is one of the world's leading designers, manufacturers and marketers of automotive products for original equipment and aftermarket customers, with approximately 71,000 team members working at more than 200 sites worldwide."

**"The union wants to force another bad contract down our throats"**

A worker at the Tenneco Cambridge plant wrote to the WSWS describing their situation: "The [UAW] International waited until the time the contract expired to start negotiating then offered us a miserable contract that no one will vote for, delaying our raise by months which saves the company all kinds of money because they will not retro pay us; and they say

they are negotiating in good faith. They also lied about our insurance and are working us 60 to 70 hrs a week!! My thoughts are that everyone that works in union facilities should all go on strike!!! They take our money and offer nothing in return!!!”

Another Tenneco worker told the WSWS, “We lost everything over the last contracts: double time for working weekends, sub pay when you’re laid off and pensions. Instead we got 401(k)s.”

A third worker commented, “The UAW says we can’t strike because the company is still bargaining in good faith. But we’re facing increasing food and gas prices and the company isn’t offering any decent raises. The union wants to force another bad contract down our throats.

“The union reps tell you this is the best you can do and just accept it. But we voted it down the first time by 78-12, and the second time it was about 50-50. But the workers in Burlington, Iowa, which is a bigger local, rejected by a big margin.”

The Tenneco workers are not alone. Later this week some 200 workers at Syncreon in Toledo, Ohio, face a July 1 contract expiration. Other contracts that will be expiring soon include Kirchoff Automotive in Lansing, Michigan, with 200 workers, on June 30; 900 workers at Magna Seating in Highland Park, Michigan, on July 21; and Kendrick Plastics in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with 300 workers, on September 15. The contract for 400 workers at the Flex-N-Gate auto parts plant in Shelby Township north of Detroit expired in May.

In November, workers at the Allison Transmission plant in Indianapolis, Indiana, face a contract expiration. Workers at Alliance Interiors, in Lansing, Michigan, which supplies the General Motors Lansing Delta Township plant face an October contract deadline.

Despite the fact that each of these plants produces components vital for the operation of the auto industry, the UAW apparatus has kept all of the contract talks separate, seeking to divide and dissipate the enormous potential collective strength of these workers. This divide-and-conquer strategy has resulted in poverty level wages throughout the auto parts industry, which has become a low-wage sector comparable to the lowest paid service workers.

A worker at Syncreon, who previously worked at Dana in Toledo, recently spoke to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* about conditions in his plant. “The pay here is even lower than at Dana, but it is not quite as strenuous work. We have 12-hour shifts, it is definitely a long day. I once worked 150 days straight.

“They are walking people out due to work mistakes. Some people are fired for working too slow. It is a fast-paced environment.”

Similar conditions exist at Tenneco and indeed throughout the auto parts industry. A long-time Tenneco worker speaking to this reporter said, “They say we are not allowed to go on strike even though the Cambridge and Burlington plants all voted to go on strike. Some guys from Michigan came down—it’s the same UAW BS.

“We build the ceramic insulators and Burlington makes the components for the spark plugs and assembles the parts. Years ago we had 200-300 employees in Cambridge, but it has been going steadily downhill. You can get a job at Aldi’s for a higher wage. We are some of the lowest paid workers out of all UAW plants. It depends on what job you are at, but some get \$13-\$14. I get \$17 and change and plant support gets a little over \$20.”

He said he was familiar with the sellout contract imposed on the striking workers at the Clarios battery plant in Holland, Ohio. “We had the same thing happen to us four years ago. We had the same contract we voted it down twice being forced on us, but we didn’t go on strike.”

He said the demand for overtime pay after eight hours was central for workers there. “When I first started here we were forced to work 72 hours a week. It had to be over 40 hours for overtime. They couldn’t keep people so it dropped a little.

“We still work a lot of 12-hour shifts. We have had four to five people die in recent years from different cancers. The deaths were tied to work, but you can’t prove it. We work with asbestos and a lot of crap.

“These billionaires doubled and tripled their wealth during COVID. A lot of that is from us workers. We did not get shut down for COVID. We were called essential workers. We had several people we didn’t think would make it. They were out five, six or seven months. Luckily, they came back.

“Every UAW brother needs to be on strike to prove a point. We need to flex our power. The UAW has become just an arm of the corporations. They take your dues, that is all.”



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**“We need to flex our power”**