THE CLARIOS WORKERS HAVE SET A POWERFUL EXAMPLE, BUT THEY CANNOT WIN THIS STRIKE ALONE



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By Will Lehman, rank-and-file candidate in the 2022 UAW presidential elections

I urge all UAW members to support the 525 striking workers at the Clarios battery manufacturing plant in Holland, Ohio, just outside of Toledo. These workers are fighting the world's largest auto battery maker and the powerful financial interests behind it. The outcome of this strike will have major consequences for the hundreds of thousands of GM, Ford and Stellantis workers facing their own contract battles this summer.

Clarios, formerly the battery division of Johnson Controls, was bought by the private equity firm Brookfield Partners in 2019. Although the company made $1.6 billion last year, its wealthy investors want to boost profits by 30 percent in the next few years before they "flip" it for a massive payout.

Striking Clarios workers on May 8, 2023 [Photo: WSWS]

In the last few years, workers have lost $10 an hour or more due to repeated cuts in piece rates. They regularly work 19 days in a row and 12 hours a shift at straight time before they get two days off and do it again. Exposure to toxic chemicals is so bad that workers must get tested for high levels of lead in their blood, which can cause lifelong disabilities and be passed onto their kids. Workers report that it is commonplace for retirees to get cancer and die a few years after leaving.

There are two more critical things about the strike that workers must know.

First, the walkout would never have happened if rank-and-file workers had not revolted against the UAW apparatus and rejected the deal Local 12 officials had negotiated by a margin of almost 99 to 1 percent. Workers then made it clear they would not accept any more contract extensions that would help the company stockpile batteries, forcing the UAW International to sanction the strike on May 8, 11 days after the defeat of the contract.

After the strike began, UAW Local 12 President Bruce Baumhower told reporters, "We're not in the mood for concessionary contracts" and "We're not going backwards in today's economy." But it was Baumhower and Local 12 officials who tried to push through a pro-company deal that contained a miserable 3 percent raise and other concessions. And it was the rank and file who threw this garbage into the trash.

Second, if this decisive strike is to be won, it is necessary for all UAW members to come to its immediate assistance.

The company is digging in for a long fight. Chief Human Resources officer Elizabeth Powers came to Clarios after overseeing a seven-month lockout of 2,200 ATI (Allegheny Technologies Inc.) steelworkers in 2014-15 and a 105-day strike in 2021.

Right now, trucks carrying thousands of batteries are being sent across the strikers' picket lines, and Lucas County sheriff's deputies are threatening workers with arrest if they don't let the trucks

through. These batteries are being delivered to Ford, GM, Stellantis and other plants in Toledo, Detroit and across the country.

Lucas County sheriff's deputy escorts trucks through picket lines at Clarios on May 8, 2023. [Photo: WSWS]

As one striking Clarios worker said, "We build 1,500 batteries a day for the Ram 1500s at the Warren Truck plant alone. I would say to those workers: Stop putting batteries into those trucks. We all got to stick together. We should all go out at once."

At the UAW Special Bargaining Convention in March, UAW President Shawn Fain postured as a militant, saying, "This week I've heard some talk about what we can't do, about what the law says. And the law has its place. But the UAW wasn't founded by asking for permission."

Fain has made all sorts of promises, but he is doing nothing to expand and win the Clarios strike.

It is true that socialists and left-wing militants who led the Toledo General Strike, the Flint Sit-Down and other mass struggles in the 1930s to build the UAW had to fight company-controlled judges, injunctions and the violence of company thugs, police and the National Guard.

But Fain and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy spat on those traditions a long time ago. At the March bargaining convention, Fain's supporters in the UAWD stripped language out of their own resolution that called for a ban on handling scab parts. The reason, they said, was because their lawyers told them to. Clarios and the auto companies are now using this to build cars with scab batteries.

Last week, Fain and UAW Secretary Treasurer Margaret Mock were rubbing shoulders with Biden administration officials, Senator Bernie Sanders and other Democrats in Washington and telling workers to look to these people to defend our rights. But these are the very same people who organized the Congressional vote to outlaw the strike by 120,000 railroad workers last year and impose a concessionary contract that the workers had previously rejected. Biden, Sanders and the rest of the Democrats are the friends of the UAW bureaucracy, not the rank and file.

If it was up to workers, we would be out tomorrow to defend the Clarios workers. But the UAW bureaucrats are shackling us.

We cannot accept this! Workers at the Jeep Toledo Assembly Complex, Dana Toledo Driveline, Dearborn Assembly and other Ford plants, Warren Truck and other Detroit area Stellantis factories and other plants should immediately organize rank-and-file strike support committees. These committees should invite Clarios workers to participate in informational pickets, meetings and other activities at their plants to inform workers and build up support for this critical strike.

The Clarios strike is a test case for all the auto bosses. In the company's top management, boards of directors and financial investors are former and current executives from GM, Dana, Tesla, Goodyear, BorgWarner, Siemens, GE and other major corporations. This includes Ron Bloom, a Wall Street asset stripper and close financial adviser of the UAW and the United Steelworkers. Bloom was on Obama's Auto Task Force in 2009, which destroyed the jobs of thousands of autoworkers and cut the wages of new hires in half.

All these companies want to impose the high costs of the transition to electric vehicles onto the backs of workers—through destroying thousands of jobs, slashing wages and creating a largely at-will, cheap labor "gig economy" workforce.

But after years of record profits, workers are determined to fight for what is ours. In every country, from France and the UK to Germany and Sri Lanka, workers want wages that keep up with inflation, cost-of-living protections, an end to intolerable and unsafe working conditions and a future for the next generation.

The Clarios workers have set a powerful example for all workers. To unite our struggles, we have to transfer decision-making and power from the UAW apparatus to the workers on the shop floor by expanding the network of rank-and-file committees, which are democratically controlled by workers ourselves. Workers at Dana, GM, Stellantis and other companies have already built committees, under the leadership of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

I urge Clarios workers to build their own rank-and-file strike committee. This committee should formulate a list of the demands that workers need, not what the company and the UAW bureaucrats say is affordable. These demands should include inflation-busting wage increases, COLA, workers' control over piece rates, line speed and safety, the restoration of the eight-hour day and 40-hour week, the restoration of overtime payments after eight hours, and ample time off to rest and spend with your families. There must be real base pay increases, not phony signing bonuses.

In addition, the committee must demand that all negotiations be live-streamed and that rank-and-file representatives be present at all sessions. No return to work without a ratified contract. No vote until the entire contract is released, not self-serving "highlights," and workers have an entire week to study and discuss the deal.

At the same time, workers should be provided their full income in strike pay to show the company that workers are ready for a real fight. The strike fund is a fighting fund for workers, not a slush fund for the UAW International and their yes-men on the regional and local levels.

This struggle is a decisive fight for the whole working class, and Clarios workers need the support of every worker.

Get involved with a rank-and-file committee »

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