

Bemis workers on strike in Terre Haute, Indiana

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Over 700 workers went on strike at the Bemis manufacturing plant in Terre Haute, Indiana on July 21. It was the first strike at the plant since the 1980s.

The workers, whose bargaining agent is Unite Here, rejected the company's contract proposal and voted overwhelmingly to strike, citing dissatisfaction with management's failure to negotiate wages or plant closures, health insurance terms that may be changed by the company at any time, increased use of temporary workers (who have lower wages and no benefits), and one-week plant shutdowns up to four times per year. Unite Here Local 1426 has more than 720 Bemis workers.

Bemis has delayed negotiations until August 10, when a federal mediator will be present. Union representatives say the strike will continue until the disputes are resolved. Meanwhile, Bemis has been busing in strikebreakers.

A union spokesperson stated that tension has been mounting between the company and the union for years. When the union bargaining committee asked the company for a modified proposal, potentially averting a strike, the company did not respond.

Workers on the picket line told the *Terre Haute Tribune Star* that the company's proposed contract would cut a quarter of workers' pay and benefits.

Bemis workers have also spoken out on *Yahoo! Finance*, describing the company's practices that are directed at cutting costs by lowering wages, decreasing benefits and destroying workers' bargaining power.

Terre Haute, the hometown of socialist and labor leader Eugene V. Debs and novelist Theodore Dreiser, was once a booming industrial center of the Midwest. In 2003, the *Indianapolis Star* identified it as a "model of stagnation". The city has been particularly hard hit

by declining rail traffic, high unemployment relative to the state average, and a steady loss of population over the last several decades.

Bemis Manufacturing, founded in Missouri in 1858 and based in Neenah, Wisconsin, is today a global, publicly traded flexible packaging manufacturer with 83 plants in 11 countries, serving the food, agricultural, and medical industries. According to a company press release, the company agreed earlier this month to purchase a food package manufacturing company from Rio Tinto, the international mining group, for \$1.2 billion, which includes 23 food packaging facilities in the US, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and New Zealand.



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