Mott’s workers end bitter 16-week strike in upstate New York

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A bitter and lengthy strike by 300 workers at the Mott’s apple products plant in Williamson, New York ended on September 13 with the acceptance of a three-year concessions contract by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The workers are scheduled to return to their jobs on September 20.

The strike began on May 23 after the parent company, Dr Pepper Snapple, a giant conglomerate that reported $555 million in profits last year, demanded a $1.50 an hour pay cut and other givebacks on pensions and health benefits. The Mott’s workers walked the picket lines for the next four months while the company continued to operate, though at reduced capacity, through the use of scabs. Dr Pepper Snapple markets 7Up, Canada Dry ginger ale and other drinks, in addition to the Dr Pepper and Snapple brands.

Although Dr Pepper Snapple dropped its pay cut demand and the call for a freezing of pensions, the new agreement includes a pay freeze and the elimination of pensions for new employees, substituting in their stead a stock-based 401(k) plan. Workers will also have to pay 20 percent of health care premium costs, and half of any future premium increases above 10 percent.

The Mott’s strike was an especially blatant example of the campaign, spearheaded by the Obama administration, to drive down wages and benefits among manufacturing workers in order to make US firms more competitive with their rivals in China and elsewhere. The trade unions have collaborated directly or indirectly with these attacks, most prominently in the case of the auto industry and the General Motors and Chrysler bankruptcies last year.

The Mott’s strike drew particular attention because the argument advanced for savage concessions had nothing to do with economic weakness, as in the case of General Motors. Instead, Dr Pepper Snapple CEO Larry Young explained that, “as a public company, Dr Pepper Snapple Group has a fiduciary responsibility to operate in the best interests of all its constituents, recognizing that a profitable business attracts investment, generates jobs and builds communities.”

This is a declaration that capitalism today requires the impoverishment of the working class. The company, which paid its CEO more than $6.5 million last year, pointed to the average wage of $14 an hour and the chronic long-term unemployment in the upstate New York area to argue for the cuts. Employers in the region, including Xerox and Kodak, have permanently laid off thousands in recent years.

The union “strategy” in this struggle was based on isolating the strikers, criticizing “corporate greed” and appealing to the same Democratic Party politicians who have backed the most ruthless attacks on every section of the working class.

In the case of the Mott’s workers, US Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis, US Senator Charles Schumer, and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew Cuomo issued toothless and phony statements calling on the company to resume negotiations. Schumer is known as “The Senator from Wall Street,” while Cuomo, as part of his gubernatorial campaign, has made it plain that after he is elected he will carry out sweeping cuts that will mean the laying off of thousands of state employees.

RWDSU president Stuart Applebaum called the settlement a victory, but the 185-62 vote for the contract in fact reflects growing anger among workers and disgust with the role of the unions. The Mott’s workers had widespread support and their struggle could have rallied an enormous response in the working class, but that would only have been possible through a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy. The pattern of betrayed strikes and relentless attacks on living standards over the past 30 years will only be broken when workers take the struggle into their own hands.

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