

“This is a case of corporate harvesting”

Striking Hostess workers speak

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On Monday, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers at the Hostess plant in Sacramento, California.

On Tuesday, court ordered mediation between the company and the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers union (BCTGM) to end the strike fell through. Hostess received court authorization yesterday to liquidate, resulting in the immediate termination of 15,000 jobs. (See: “Judge approves Hostess liquidation, eliminating 15,000 jobs”)

The members of BCTGM at the facility on Arden Way had been on strike since November 11 in response to a wide package of concessions demanded by Hostess in the course of its bankruptcy proceedings. There were about two dozen workers in total on the picket line, and they crowded around the reporting team to describe their conditions.

Jerry has worked at Hostess for 21 years. He said, “I can’t accept the concessions they’re demanding, I’ve got a family to support. They want me to lose all my seniority and cut my pay. As it is, sometimes they only work you for four or five hours then they send you home. I have six kids, and one of them is severely disabled. Thankfully we get money from the state for in-home assistance, unless the governor decides to cut that.”

Jerry added, “It’s a good company but management is none too swift. In a given shift we probably lose a few hundred loaves due to something simple like a lack of trays. The workers know what we need, but management doesn’t have a clue.”

Another worker interjected, “We’ve been giving concessions for the past seven years, ever since their first bankruptcy. They’ve been promising factory upgrades, and we’ve seen none of that. They were not

guaranteeing us a full workweek, they demanded an 8 percent pay cut, and finally about a year ago they stopped paying into the pensions. If we accepted their contract I’d be making less than when I’d started 23 years ago.”

Another worker told reporters that under the old plan he could collect a pension of \$2,050 a month at age 55, but now he had to wait until he was 65 just to collect \$692.

“This is a case of corporate harvesting, like in the movie *Wall Street*. The first thing the bosses did after the last bankruptcy was give each other raises and bonuses with all the concessions they got from us. Then they ran back to the bankruptcy court this past January saying they didn’t have any money to pay our pensions. We have to fight and win back the pensions we worked for because if we give up now, they’ll just come back to take more from us in a few years.”

BCTGM has supported the liquidation of the company, claiming that Hostess’ problems are simply the result of bad management, and that new owners would manage better and invest in production.

Many workers were skeptical about whether a new management would be any better than the old one. According to Ken who had worked there over 20 years “I’ve been through at least five different managements and they’ve all been awful.”

“We’re working on old machines from back in the 50’s and 60’s, and just look at the condition these trucks in the yard are in. None of these different owners and managers have updated the place. But they bring in these CEO’s who grab a few million, get a big bonus, and run. There’s nothing to keep the next guy from doing the same.

“Now the pensions are gone and they’re trying to take more. They’re trying to take back everything the

union's gained over the past 50 years. All we're asking for is to take care of our families, but these CEO's are just in it for the greed. It can't go on forever, but it's not going to be their decision to stop. It's going to be us forcing them."

Workers at the bakery were either represented by BCTGM or the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The Teamsters' union pushed through massive concessions on their members in exchange for a stake in the company. According to picketers the cuts they agreed to were coming out to \$270 to \$320 a week.

Several bakers pointed out that the last time the IBT struck they didn't cross the picket line. But no apparent effort had been made to join the negotiations of the two unions. One worker said, "I agree that the whole plant should fight together, but the upper levels in these unions don't cooperate."

In the course of discussion the WSWs reporters described the need to coordinate not just within the factory, but internationally. Workers agreed, with one adding "The only way to beat these companies is to give them nowhere to run."



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