Chicago area Coca-Cola workers enter fourth week of strike, face isolation by Teamsters

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Approximately 319 striking Coca-Cola workers of Teamsters Local 727 have entered their fourth week at two production and distribution facilities in the Chicago region.

The strike began on December 3rd at 5 a.m. following charges against Coca-Cola of unfair labor practices. The current contract expired on December 1st, with Teamsters representatives claiming they had met with Coca-Cola management twelve times since October 28th to discuss contract negotiations.

A large majority of workers voted to authorize a strike, with only 26 of the 252 voting 'no.' The striking production, warehouse and transport workers are employed at Coca-Cola Refreshment facilities in the suburban towns of Niles and Alsip, Illinois.

The Teamsters have labeled the strike as an "unfair labor practice strike" and have filed numerous complaints against Coca-Cola Refreshments with the National Labor Relations Board.

According to Teamsters.org, the complaints include "threatening employees with job loss for engaging with the union; engaging in bad faith bargaining during negotiations; surface bargaining with no intention of reaching a new agreement, including Coca-Cola Refreshments' use of delay tactics and insistence on unreasonable proposals; soliciting contract proposals directly from Coca-Cola Refreshments workers; unilaterally changing the terms and conditions of the current collective bargaining agreement still in effect; refusing to fulfill multiple information requests from the union; and intimidating employees in the workplace with baseball bats."

The union is accusing management of walking around facilities with baseball bats and bouncing them on the ground while speaking to workers about contract negotiations in an effort to intimidate them. Teamsters Local 727 representative Will Petty stated, "Nobody was physically assaulted, but they certainly felt intimidated."

On December 8th, the Teamsters and Coca-Cola agreed to federal mediation and met on December 14th. The meeting ended in deadlock with Teamsters representatives stating that Coca-Cola's latest offer "stood still on paltry wage increases," and contained high health insurance costs.

The union estimates Coca-Cola's proposed wage increases would amount to 50 cents a year over the five year contract. Moreover, it claims that under Coca-Cola's proposed contract, health care cost would rise by 37 percent for two years of the new contract for single employees, while insurance costs would increase roughly 18 percent for employee-plus-one coverage and 10 percent for member families.

Additionally, there are issues stemming from shift preferences, forced overtime without notification, grievance procedures and workers' rights to a guaranteed 40-hour workweek. Workers at the two facilities currently make between $12 and $19 an hour.

For its part, the Teamsters have effectively moved to isolate the striking workers. Representing 15,000 of the total 65,000 US Coca-Cola workforce, the 319 striking workers have been left to fend for themselves against the international conglomerate that is Coca-Cola.

The last strike by Coca-Cola Teamsters workers took place in East Hartford, Connecticut in 2012. Approximately 350 workers went on strike for six weeks and were isolated as the Teamsters called no other locals out in support of the Coke workers.

When the strike ended, the union agreed to a paltry wage increase of $2.75 over 6 years, amounting to less than 50 cents a year. However, workers were forced to forgo 50 cents of their hourly wage to cover health care cost for one year. In a pathetic show of cowardice, Chris Roos, the president of Local 1035 at the time stated, “There were some disappointing language changes that were hard to accept but the fight was to maintain job security.”

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Meanwhile in 2013 Teamsters President James P. Hoffa made $381,403. General Secretary Richard Hall made $301,519, followed by the Executive Assistant to the General President, William Smith, who raked in $251,882. International Organizer Timothy Lewis was paid the handsome sum of $250,450. Coming in right behind is Department Director Gary Wilten, who brought home $231,970. And the list goes on.

At the same time, striking Coca-Cola workers—whose health care has been terminated due to clauses in the contract that terminates insurance during a strike—are faced with strike pay that will amount to a paltry $100 to $180 a week.

Summing it all up is Carl Maxwell, a member of the Teamsters bargaining team, who stated, “Get us in the middle class, and we'll keep helping you make your billions.” The trade union bureaucrats will do everything they can to maintain the profits of the company in order to sustain their own lifestyles. Coca-Cola workers should look to the struggles of the auto workers against the UAW.

As there as at Coca-Cola, the role of the union is to effectively police its rank-and-file workers and prevent a widespread unified opposition of workers against the companies.

Workers must fight back and build independent rank-and-file committees completely independent of the Teamsters, to fight the union-company conspiracy against Coca-Cola workers.