

Strike continues at Libbey Glass factory in Toledo, Ohio

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A strike that began October 12 at the Libbey Glass factory in Toledo, Ohio is continuing with no progress in negotiations reported. Members of the International Association of Machinists Lodge 105 and Glass Workers and Pottery Workers Local 59 struck when their contract extensions expired.

Two other local unions affiliated with the United Steelworkers (USW) had agreed to extend their contracts until midnight October 17, but have been honoring picket lines. A distribution center in Perrysburg, Ohio is also affected by the walkout. All told, some 750 workers are involved in the job action.

The company had reportedly offered a miserable 4.5 percent wage increase over three years. Workers are also angered by mandatory overtime, downsizing, increases in health care costs and work rule changes.

The walkout followed overwhelming contract rejection votes by plant workers, who gave a resounding thumbs down to a management proposal accepted by the unions. Local officials have called for a “fair deal,” without specifying union demands. But it is clear that workers are upset with the miserly pay increase offered by management under conditions where Toledo-based Libbey remains highly profitable, earning \$66.3 million in 2015.

The company is attempting to continue production during the walkout using management personnel as strikebreakers. A management statement declared, “Libbey is fully committed to return to the table and resume negotiations. Libbey is prepared to run the Toledo plant and distribution centers without interruption during the strike period and will continue to provide its customers with the excellent service they have come to expect.” Pickets told the *Toledo Blade* that three of 11 production lines were in operation.

For their part, the unions involved in the walkout

have refused to mobilize workers in the city behind the striking workers, leaving them isolated on the picket line. The USW has refused to sanction an official strike despite the walkout by the other two locals and the fact that the USW contracts have expired. Indeed, the USW indicated it might agree to terms of a separate agreement in the midst of the walkout.

This is a repeat of the USW’s 2015 betrayal of the three-month strike by oil workers at the BP-Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio, just outside of Toledo.

Strikers must make a broad appeal to workers in Toledo and reach out to other Libbey Glass workers nationally and internationally. Toledo has a large industrial working class, including some 6,000 workers employed at the Jeep complex and some 4,000 workers employed in glass and glass parts production in Toledo and surrounding counties.

The city is the site of the powerful 1934 Toledo Auto-Lite strike, led by socialists, which along with the mass struggles in Minneapolis and San Francisco paved the way for the organization of the industrial trade unions.

Libbey has two other factories, one in Shreveport, Louisiana and another in Monterrey, Mexico. Workers in Shreveport have a separate contract from workers in Toledo and have continued to work during the Toledo walkout. In March 2015 the United Steelworkers pushed through an agreement at the Shreveport plant following four rejection votes by plant workers, each by a greater majority. Workers in Shreveport reportedly earn \$2 to \$6 an hour less than workers in Toledo depending on their skill. There are 427 workers at the facility.

In 2013, Libbey Glass announced 200 job cuts at its Shreveport facility, with some of the work relocated to Monterrey and Toledo. The USW offered no opposition to the cuts, merely offering to discuss severance and

health benefits with the company.

In conversations with the *Toledo Blade*, strikers expressed concern over excessive executive compensation and a change of “culture” within the company in recent years. According to salary.com, Libbey CEO Stephanie Streeter pocketed \$3.07 million in executive compensation in 2015. That included \$792,000 in base pay and \$728,000 in bonus and incentive. Stock awards and options added on another \$1.48 million.

Workers indicated as well that they expected more of a pay increase to offset the impact of concessions surrendered in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. “We want our jobs, we want our insurance, But we’re not going to take peanuts anymore,” one worker told the *Blade* .

In 1998 Glass Molders Local 59 waged a 12-day strike against Libbey Glass over the question of staffing changes that threatened job losses.

Libbey Glass began operations in Toledo in 1888 after the city offered to help relocate an already existing factory in East Cambridge, Massachusetts. The company eventually became successful and profitable, with its cut glass featured at the 1904 St Louis World’s Fair.

The success of Libbey’s helped spark the location of other glass production in Toledo, which came to be known as the “Glass City.” The city’s “big four” glass firms include: Owens-Illinois Glass Company, Glass Fibers Inc., now Johns Manville, Libbey Glass Co., and Owens Corning Fiberglass.

Workers in the glass industry have a militant tradition as well. In 1936, a strike by flat glass workers, which supplied the automotive industry, shut down glass production nationwide, including Libbey facilities in Toledo.

In 1965, a strike by the glass molders union involved 32,000 workers and shut down 85 percent of glass production east of the Rockies. It won a 15 percent wage increase. Another strike in 1968 involved 47,000 glass workers and shut down 95 percent of glass factories.

Founded in 1878, the American Flint Glass Union, with headquarters in Toledo, was one of the oldest unions in the country. It merged with the United Steelworkers in 2003. The Glass Molders union voted this year to likewise merge with the USW, which has

pursued such acquisitions to offset the loss of hundreds of thousands of steelworkers’ jobs due to its corporatist and nationalist policies.



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