Strikes end at Libbey Glass in Ohio and Jim Beam in Kentucky

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29 October 2016

Over the past week unions wrapped up short strikes at whiskey maker Jim Beam in Kentucky and Libbey Glass in Toledo, Ohio. The walkouts involved some 250 workers at distilleries in Clermont and Boston, Kentucky, and close to 1,000 workers at table glassmaker Libbey in Toledo.

The strikes reflect a growing spirit of resistance in the working class, which was also manifested by strike votes by Philadelphia transit workers, walkouts by symphony musicians in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, a strike by Pennsylvania state university faculty and coaches, a strike by video game actors in Hollywood, as well as one by Harvard University dining hall staff.

Workers at Jim Beam struck October 15 in a dispute that centered on excessive overtime by regular employees, who can work 60- to 80-hour weeks. The workers wanted more full-time employees to be brought on at the distilleries and less reliance on temporary workers. The walkout came after workers unanimously voted down a two-year contract proposal that had the backing of local union officials from the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

The new offer ultimately ratified by a 204-19 vote reportedly contained a cap on the number of temporary workers and a commitment by management to hire full-time workers. Before the strike the company would have as many as 100 temporary workers per day.

The contract for the distillery workers expired in August, but the UFCW extended contract talks. Workers rejected one proposal brought back by the union by a 201-19 margin. They then rejected a revised proposal by a 174-46 vote and then went on strike.

Four years ago the UFCW accepted a deal instituting a two-tier wage system that lowered starting wages for new workers. The union claimed at the time that this would lead to the hiring of more full-time workers and reduce overtime.

The walkout came at a time of booming sales in the whiskey industry. Kentucky produces 95 percent of the world's supply of bourbon whiskey. Bourbon, named for an area in Kentucky, is produced from corn and must be stored in charred oak containers and cannot contain additives.

Workers at Libbey Glass returned to the job Wednesday in a strike that began October 12. The dispute involved members of four separate unions at the plant that makes table glasses. The new contracts reportedly contained a 5 percent pay increase over three years. The initial management pay offer was 4.5 percent. Over the key question of attendance and overtime policies, the company published a statement saying that the new agreements contained "compromises" over these issues. No elaboration was available from union officials.

About 220 workers, members of the Glass Molder Plastics Local 59 and the International Association of Machinists Lodge 105 struck the Toledo facility earlier this month. Members of two other locals affiliated with the United Steelworkers extended their contracts, but honored the picket lines of the glass molders and machinists. All four locals now have agreements in place.

Among the key issues raised by workers was opposition to proposed company changes to work rules that would make it easier to fire employees. Workers also complained of excessive overtime, with workers forced to labor for 12 hours at a time under conditions where the company could make them work an extra four hours with very little notice. The factory had a system called the "Southern Swing Shift," in which workers worked seven days on night shift, seven days on day shift and then seven on second, with only one

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weekend a month granted as time off.

The strike at Libbey was the first since a 1998 walkout by Glass Molders Local 59 that lasted 12 days over the question of staffing changes.

The unions have long since abandoned the policy of nationwide walkouts. Several strikes in the 1960s involved tens of thousands of glass workers and shut down production coast to coast.

Both Libbey Glass and Jim Beam are part of multinational corporations. Jim Beam is owned by Suntory Holdings Ltd., a Japanese beverage company. It is one of the oldest companies in the distribution of alcoholic beverages in Japan and produces Japanese whiskey. It is now one of the largest distilling companies in the world. It bought Jim Beam in 2014 for a reported $16 billion. Beam Inc. CEO Matthew Shattock made some $38.7 million off the deal.

Libbey Glass is a global company, with operations in the US, Mexico, South America, Europe and China. It made $66.3 million in profits on revenue of $882 million last year.

Libbey CEO Stephanie Streeter took in $3.07 million in executive compensation in 2015.

The recent uptick in strike activity reflects a determination by workers to win back past concessions given up in the wake of the 2008 financial crash now that profits are booming in many sectors. It follows the rebellion by US autoworkers in 2015 against the attempt by the United Auto Workers to foist sellout contracts onto the backs of workers.

This development has not been welcomed by the unions, which have been focusing their efforts on mobilizing votes behind Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. In most cases these strikes have erupted against efforts by union officials to obtain ratification of inferior agreements. For their part the unions have sought to squelch these strikes as quickly as possible lest they erupt into a broader movement of the working class and embarrass the Democratic Party.

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