

Southern Illinois meatpacking workers enter third week of strike

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Some 225 meatpacking workers at the Holten Meat Inc. processing plant, located in Sauget, Illinois on the southern edge of East St. Louis, have been on strike since March 18. Workers struck after overwhelmingly voting down a second contract proposal by the company.

Another 15 maintenance workers, who have a separate contract, joined the picket line last week after the expiration their labor agreement.

The previous three-year contract for production workers expired on September 2016. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union agreed to extend the old contract until a new agreement was reached.

Details of the rejected contract have not been revealed. However, UFCW Local 655 officials have said the dispute is largely over work schedules. “The issue here is not over economics,” UFCW Local 655 President David Cook said in a statement. “The critical issue is seniority language as it relates to job mobility, an issue the company steadfastly refuses to recognize.”

Night shift workers at Holten cannot use their seniority to bid for an open day-shift job. The union said the company had offered to make seniority rights part of their company policy but refused to add similar wording to the contract. When a day shift becomes available, the company will give it to new workers instead of a current employee.

Strikers are also opposed to the company’s shift to a six-day production schedule without paying workers overtime for weekend labor. Workers are given a day off during the week but lose time with their families. “If you guys want to run six days, pay us the overtime instead of making us take a day off during the week,” Trinetta Kitchen, a pack line worker with three children, told the *St. Louis Dispatch*. “It takes away

from me spending time with my family.”

Working conditions and schedules for meatpacking workers are notoriously brutal with widespread cases of carpal tunnel syndrome and other injuries due to the repetitive and grueling nature of the work. At the same time wages plummeted in the industry after the UFCW betrayed a series of bitter strikes in the 1980s. The East St. Louis area—formerly known as the “Hog Capital of the Nation”—is one of the poorest urban areas in the country and is littered with the ruins of closed meatpacking plants and stockyards once operated by Armour, Swift and other corporations.

According to glassdoor.com, the average pay of a Holten meat packing worker is \$8-\$10 an hour. The union’s declaration that the strike is not about economics when workers are making poverty wages makes strikingly clear the bankruptcy of the UFCW. It only means that workers will continue to barely survive when a new contract is passed.

The strikers, which include many women workers who are the only breadwinners in their families, are determined to improve their work conditions and living standards. But the UFCW has left the embattled workers isolated, telling them that impotent consumer boycotts and prayer vigils with local Democrats, union executives and clergy leaders will beat back the intransigence of the company.

Holten’s parent company, Branding Iron Holdings Inc., is one of the top privately held companies in the region with 2016 revenue of \$400 million. In a company statement, officials pledged to continue operations during the strike, adding ominously, “We look forward to Union members returning to work following a peaceful resolution of this dispute.”

In the fall of 2016, the UFCW 655 rammed through three sell-out contracts with grocery store chains

Schnucks, Dierbergs and Shop ‘n Save. The contracts left workers with stagnant wages and higher health insurance fees.

The Facebook posts by grocery workers denouncing the role of the UFCW at the time should serve as a warning to Holten workers. One worker said, “Bull.. this union is weak!! David Cook [UFCW 655 president] is a crook probably planning a golf trip with all of the CEOs. That contract is BS and it should have never been brought to a vote.. and why in the world would you separate your union workers?? Complete bull. Makes sense when you want to pass a horrible contract. This union is WEAK.”

Another worker said the union “accepts garbage contracts. All that needs to be said. This union really doesn’t care about its people at all.” Another worker commented, “I make \$8.05 after ten years of paying you guys.”

“People, you have to look at the overall costs. The cost of living and benefits? They are not giving enough money to help with the increase in health benefits. So we would actually be losing!! Vote NO! I don't want and can't afford to be off work during a strike but I surely can't afford to be out all that money for years to come either. Do the math. Seriously!” said another worker.

Between 1970 and the mid-1990s, wages in the meatpacking industry fell by as much as 50 percent, leaving workers, once some of the highest-paid industrial workers, among the lowest compensated currently. Companies also exploit large numbers of immigrant workers from Latin America, including undocumented workers under the constant threat of raids and deportation.

During the 1980s there were a series of bitter struggles at Cudahy, Wilson, Iowa Beef Processors, Hormel, Oscar Mayer and other meatpacking companies that were defeated due to the treachery of the UFCW. Among the most important was the 1985-1986 strike against Hormel by the UFCW local P-9 in Austin, Minnesota.

Hormel workers defied the national UFCW’s order to accept lower industry-wide wages it had negotiated with the major corporations. When their contract expired in August 1985, Hormel workers rejected demands for a 23 percent pay cut from the profitable company, and walked out in Austin and Ottumwa,

Iowa. They organized mass picketing at the plants, along with thousands of supporters from the Twin Cities in Minnesota, and in defiance of the UFCW sent out “flying pickets” to bring out other meatpackers in a common struggle.

The UFCW responded by issuing letters to all AFL-CIO unions not to support the Hormel workers and moving to put the local under receivership. On January 21, 1986, Minnesota’s Democratic governor, Rudy Perpich, sent in 500 National Guard troops to escort strikebreakers through the strikers’ lines.

The UFCW organized a back-to-work movement among the strikers and then “organized” the scabs brought in by the company into a new union local, controlled by the national union. In the end, more than 1,000 strikers were forced out, another 300 were fired for strike activities and the militants of Local P-9 were banished from the plant and the local union.

Striking Holten workers will have to take the conduct of this struggle in their own hands if they are not to suffer the same fate as thousands of other meatpackers and grocery workers. This means electing rank-and-file committees to organize mass picketing against strikebreaking and reaching out to the broadest sections of workers throughout the St. Louis area—including autoworkers, teachers and young people—to defend their struggle.

The struggle for better livelihoods is ultimately bound up with a fight against the capitalist system, which ruthlessly exploits them, and the two capitalist parties, the Democrats and Republicans, which defend the profit system.



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