

Coca-Cola workers in Alabama on strike for better wages, health insurance

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On August 10, workers at four Coca-Cola United bottling facilities in the Mobile, Alabama area went on strike after the company offered them a contract that included increased insurance rates, a two-percent pay raise for existing employees, and a pay cut for new employees. The previous contract with Teamsters Local 991, covering 275 workers, expired in July and the workers had been on the job for three weeks after that on an extension when the new contract was offered.

Coca-Cola Bottling Company United, Inc., headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, is North America's second largest privately held Coca-Cola bottling operation. In October, Coca-Cola United acquired the Leroy, Robertsdale, and Mobile, Alabama and the Ocean Springs, Mississippi plants from Coca-Cola Consolidated. Workers at those plants are currently on strike.

Union steward David Stephens, who works at the Robertsdale plant, told Al.Com that the Teamsters were striking primarily because of the increase in the healthcare premiums and the insultingly low pay offered to new hires under terms of the proposed contract.

"It's not with the older guys here, but the new ones coming in," Stephens told Al.Com's reporters. The salaries offered to new hires, he said, would amount to \$6 to \$8 an hour less than the salaries of current employees.

While Stephens' assertions about the pay cut for new employees are essentially true, he left out important details of the contract that add up to pay cuts for existing employees as well.

On August 11, a YouTube user named Alabama DS uploaded a video describing the contract that workers were offered. On the video he reports that the first contract proffered by Coca-Cola United stipulated a cut

in pay for all employees and lowered commissions for sales employees from 38 cents a case to 21 cents per case. The contract also stipulated that warehouse workers would be paid per piece loaded instead of an hourly wage. After the union membership voted down the contract, Teamsters officials then agreed to Coca-Cola United's plea for an extension.

In the second iteration of the contract, Alabama DS says, existing workers were offered a two-percent raise each year over the four-year contract. Alabama DS says that comes to an extra \$8 a week for him, "That's not even cost of living," he says on the video; however, his insurance plan would cost him an extra \$35 a week, eating up the meager raise. Coca-Cola United would also stop paying into workers' 401(k) retirement savings plan.

According to DS, in the days prior to the strike, Coca-Cola United had supervisors pressuring employees. One of the newer workers in Leroy, Alabama, he says, was told he wasn't "used to making that kind of money, anyhow, he needed to just go ahead and sign the contract."

Coca-Cola United has bussed workers from their non-union facilities to keep up production during the strike, and has said that production and distribution will continue.

In July, with the strike deadline approaching, Coca-Cola United signed an agreement to pay the University of Alabama \$2 million a year for exclusive vending rights on the University's campus. They also renewed a similar contract with the athletic department. As part of the deal the company also agreed to provide for student scholarship funds. The funding put into this branding campaign stands in sharp contrast to management's insistence that workers take pay cuts and more expensive insurance.

The striking workers at Coca-Cola United are part of a resurgence of working-class struggle throughout the world. The near unanimous strike vote by Coca-Cola workers follows the strike vote by UPS workers nationwide, where the Teamsters are trying to foist what is essentially a tiered pay system onto UPS workers, as well as a more part-time “hybrid” work-base. These men and women are being asked to do physically demanding work without adequate pay, healthcare, or retirement funds. In resisting demands that new hires take cuts, workers are taking a principled stand and declaring that they will not allow management to further divide workers with such schemes.

However, workers cannot win their demands within the framework imposed by the Teamsters, which is determined to prevent the struggle of Coca Cola United workers from joining their struggle with that of UPS workers and the working class more generally. The critical question facing Coca-Cola workers is to break the isolation of their struggle and link up with a broader movement of the working class.

To win their struggle Coca-Cola United workers must organize their own rank-and-file workers’ committees independent of the Teamsters to oversee the contract struggle and pursue the fight for decent pay, workplace safety, health insurance, and retirement plans.



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