

Toledo Coca-Cola workers continue strike over unsafe conditions and rising health care costs

Katy Kinner
15 November 2020

Workers at the Coca-Cola Consolidated facility in north Toledo, Ohio, have been on strike since November 2. While the union wants to limit the strike to a set of minimal and vague demands, workers are expressing their anger over low wages, unsafe conditions and rising health care costs.

After months of negotiations on a new contract, 100 workers, members of Teamsters Local 20, rejected the company's final contract offer and began a strike. Toledo Coca-Cola Bottling Company is the largest cola bottling facility in the country and employs 130 people. The factory has continued to operate throughout the strike.

On the second day of the job action, a tractor-trailer driven by a strikebreaker hit a picket, sending 59-year-old Jeff Rudnicki to the hospital. No charges have been filed and Toledo police brushed off the incident, claiming that Rudnicki walked in a manner that "intentionally caused him to be struck by the trailer."

In one photo strikers held picket signs reading, "Coca-Cola Consolidated doesn't protect its employees from COVID-19" and "Coca-COVID."

A leaflet posted on the Teamsters Local 20 Facebook page stated that workers went on strike to protect themselves from unsafe conditions in the plant and to demand lowered health care costs. One section of the leaflet read, "Even though Coca-Cola's Toledo distributor is raking in Covid profits, the company has failed to comply with Ohio and CDC [Centers for Disease Control] Covid safety guidelines and is demanding that its essential food supply chain workers pay up to almost \$10,000 every year for family health care at a time when they are putting themselves and their families at risk to help our community." The

leaflet is the only mention of the Coca-Cola strike on the union's Facebook page.

However, neither the leaflet nor any official demands have been posted on either the Teamsters Local 20 official website or reported to journalists. In a statement to the *Toledo Blade*, Teamsters Local 20 President Mark Schmiehausen merely explained that Toledo Coca-Cola workers had been working long hours during the pandemic and, "We feel that the company is not negotiating in good faith. That's all we ask for is for them to be fair." He also asked the nearby community to show their support by boycotting Coca-Cola products.

The strike is a reflection of growing anger among many sections of workers who are looking for a way to fight against unsafe working conditions exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The failure of the Teamsters to publish strike updates or list any strong demands demonstrates that union bureaucrats, in tandem with company management, are seeking to ensure that production is maintained at all cost even amidst the dangerous conditions produced by the pandemic.

The safety conditions in the bottling plant are sure to worsen as the pandemic resurges in the US and globally. According to the most recent Ohio Department of Health COVID-19 update, the state is reaching record numbers of cases and hospitalizations. A record number 8,071 coronavirus cases were reported over 24 hours between November 12 and 13, breaking the previous record from the day before by more than 1,000 cases.

Hospitalizations—which are a more reliable metric for the state of community transmissions—were also up to

2,075 on November 5, a 55 percent increase from two weeks prior. Of the hospitalized patients, the Ohio Department of Health reports 541 were in the intensive care unit, breaking the previous record from April of 533 ICU patients.

Sixty-eight of Ohio's 88 counties are at Red Level 3—indicating there is a high risk of exposure and spread. This number is expected to rise.

In addition, Coca-Cola workers across the country, including in Ohio, face the possibility of mass layoffs. In August, Coca-Cola announced a “restructuring plan” stating that the company would begin with 4,000 “voluntary” layoffs in the US and Puerto Rico followed by an unnamed number of “involuntary” layoffs around the world. These are only the latest job cuts to be carried out by Coca-Cola, which has reduced its global workforce by 100,000 in the last eight years. James Quincy, CEO of Coca-Cola, has a net worth of \$47.3 million and received a salary of almost \$19 million in 2019.

Toledo Coca-Cola workers must break the isolation of their strike and fight to mobilize other sections of workers—in health care, auto and education—against the strikebreaking operation by management. A powerful movement in the working class must be developed against the inhuman policies of the ruling class to let COVID-19 spread unchecked. This requires the formation by Coca-Cola strikers of a rank-and-file safety committee independent of the Teamsters.

The pandemic cannot be controlled in a humane and effective way within a system that sacrifices the lives of workers for the sake of the ever-greater accumulation of private wealth by the corporate and financial oligarchy. Workers need to adopt a socialist program and perspective aimed at the reorganization of economic life based not on private profit, but human need.

For more information and help forming a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace, contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact