

UFCW Local 340A announces deal to avert strike at Smithfield meatpacking plant in South Dakota

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On Saturday the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 340A reached a tentative agreement on a four-year contract with the Smithfield pork processing plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with voting scheduled to take place on Thursday. The plant employs 3,700 workers and accounts for 5 percent of pork production in the United States.

The agreement comes one week after Sioux Falls meatpacking workers rejected the first tentative agreement by a 99 percent margin on June 3. The militancy animating the overwhelming no vote was expressed most sharply in workers voting 98 percent yes to authorize a strike shortly after.

Meatpacking was one of the most unsafe industries in the United States before the pandemic, and it is now one of the worst hit by the coronavirus. The past year saw 30 percent of the 194,000 meatpacking workers in the country test positive for the virus and at least 296 dead, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network. Working in close and unsanitary quarters while doing injury-inducing repetitive motions on the line make adequate cleaning and social distancing measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 barely possible.

Meanwhile, Smithfield's parent company, Hong Kong's WH Group, the biggest pork processing company in the world, stated last month that it will spend up to \$1.9 billion on its stock buy-back program to the benefit the company's largest investors.

While UFCW Local 340A initially sought an increased starting wage of \$19 an hour, to match the rate of the JBS pork plant 70 miles away in Worthington, Minnesota, the new tentative agreement proposes a starting wage of \$18.75 along with a \$520

one-time bonus if the agreement is signed. The proposed contract preserves a 15-minute afternoon break for all workers which Smithfield threatened to revoke.

The pay increase of the static new starting wage will be mostly eaten up by inflation. Last month, according to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), inflation hit a 13-year record high of 5 percent, resulting in the decline of real wages every month for the last year, pushed by monthly price increases for basic commodities and consumer goods.

Even if inflation falls to the 2 percent level seen in previous years, the proposed starting wage would still mostly be eaten up by inflation.

In rushing to propose a new tentative agreement, the UFCW is hoping to blunt the outbreak of a new strike, which would coincide with the growing wave of strikes across the United States.

Thousands of workers have gone on strike. Striking workers at Volvo Trucks in Dublin, Virginia and Warrior Met in Brookwood, Alabama massively voted down contracts backed by the United Auto Workers and United Mine Workers of America unions, respectively. Steelworkers at ATI have been on strike for almost three months, while 650 refinery workers have been locked out by ExxonMobil since May 1. Such struggles demonstrate the growing conflict between rank-and-file workers and corporatist trade unions, an indication of massive struggles ahead.

The overwhelming no vote by Sioux Falls workers of the first tentative agreement and the 98 percent strike authorization expresses years of brewing pent-up anger and opposition, intensified by the pandemic.

The Sioux Falls Smithfield plant witnessed one of the

first major COVID-19 outbreaks in the meatpacking industry. According to OSHA, of 3,700 workers, 1,294 have been infected and four have died. Last April, the plant at one point accounted for the most coronavirus infections in South Dakota. The UFCW insisted on keeping the plant open. However, the wave of COVID-19 infections was met with protests by workers against unsafe working conditions, which led to a temporarily idling of the plant.

Tina Gonzalez, business agent for UFCW Local 304A, expressed the nervousness of the union to the growing militancy of Sioux Falls workers, stating:

“I think that the biggest part that convinced them was seeing how much support we actually had at the plant,” she said. “I don’t think that they realized how tired our workers are right now. I don’t think that they realized that they’re willing—even though 60 percent of them live paycheck to paycheck—I don’t think that they realized and really understood that they would much rather struggle for a couple of weeks or even a month of going out on strike than continue to work under the conditions that they were, to continue to be working for the same amount of money that Taco John’s was paying. So I think that those things were a real eye opener for them.”

Gonzalez implied that the company was taken aback by the militancy of the workers in voting to authorize a strike. In reality, this applies equally to the company and the union. The UFCW and that of its parent union, the AFL-CIO, are fearful that the Sioux Falls workers could ignite further protests and strikes by other meatpacking workers and unite their struggles with other sections of workers, such as those in the auto and mining industries.

Throughout the pandemic the UFCW ensured the continuation of production in order to protect Smithfield’s profits. Sickness and death ensued, and the UFCW has blood on its hands.

The UFCW has proven that it will allow workers to get sick and die in order to maintain profits. How can such an organization then be trusted with protecting the livelihoods of workers?

Workers must take this struggle into their own hands and follow the footsteps of workers at Volvo Truck in Virginia by forming a rank-and-file committee to wage a direct struggle against both management and the union. For more information about forming a rank-and-

file committee at your workplace, visit wsws.org/workers and sign up today.



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