

Why Sioux Falls Smithfield workers should vote “No” on the second sellout contract

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16 June 2021

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Today, for the second time in two weeks, over 3,700 Smithfield meatpacking workers in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, are voting on a contract that their union, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), is falsely calling a “historic” win against the company. The contract is nothing of the sort.

Sioux Falls meatpacking workers rejected the first contract by a staggering 99 percent margin on June 3. The workers voted 98 percent yes to authorize a strike shortly after. The union and the company worked quickly to propose a new version of the contract in order to stave off the strike, fearful that Smithfield workers would lend their own power to the growing wave of strikes across the United States.

Little has changed in the contract since the first vote.

While most of the details of both the first contract and the latest contract have been kept a secret from the public, the first contract offered no increase in wages and would have eliminated a 15 minute break for workers who pull 8 hour shifts under grueling conditions.

Workers at the plant currently make below the area average for the industry, with a starting wage of \$17 per hour compared to \$19 at a nearby JBS pork plant 70 miles away in Worthington, Minnesota.

It has been widely reported in the local news that the UFCW has negotiated a starting salary of \$19 an hour in the new contract in order to “remain competitive” with the JBS plant. However, when the WSWWS called the union office Wednesday afternoon for clarification on the contract details, one union representative, Mustafa Kalombo, reluctantly revealed that the real new wage is actually \$18.75 plus a one time signing bonus. Furthermore, this wage increase will only affect the lowest paid workers. The details of how pay for the

more experienced workers, who are broken up into “very many” tiers according to Kalombo, will be affected remains a mystery.

In fact, when one takes into consideration skyrocketing inflation and the rising cost of living, the meager \$1.75 raise will likely amount to a pay cut by the end of the contract.

In the first contract Smithfield was demanding an increase of roughly \$200 per year to workers’ out-of-pocket health care expenses. Such a demand should be considered egregious under any circumstances but it is all the more remarkable when one considers that these workers were on the front lines of the pandemic throughout the entire last year with no increase in pay. Instead, workers were offered a \$500 “responsibility bonus” at the beginning of the pandemic if they reported to work for a month without an unexcused absence.

The new contract reduces, but does not eliminate, the increase to out-of-pocket expenses. This is all the more insulting given that the Sioux Falls plant was the site of one of the earliest major COVID-19 outbreaks in the meat industry. Out of a workforce of 3,700, 1,294 were infected and four have died, according to OSHA. At one point last April, the plant accounted for the large majority of coronavirus infections in the state of South Dakota.

Throughout the course of the last year, the UFCW has demonstrated its real attitude towards the workers and loyalty to the company as it worked hand in hand with the company to keep the plant open while workers got sick and died in order to maintain profits. How could any worker trust such an organization to fight on their behalf for a decent wage, health care, safe working conditions and other basic worker rights?

The contract is nothing short of a slap in the face to

the thousands of essential workers at the Sioux Falls plant who, as part of an international network of workers, kept meat production going throughout the pandemic at great risk to themselves and their loved ones. To “repay” these workers who were hailed as heroes at every turn by the company and in the media, Smithfield, with the support of the UFCW, is offering a pittance to workers.

The reality is that workers everywhere are being made to bear the burden of the trillion dollar bailout that was handed over to Wall Street and the corporations at the start of the pandemic. In Smithfield’s case, its parent company, Hong Kong’s WH Group, the biggest pork processor in the world, announced over the weekend that it will spend up to \$1.9 billion in a new share repurchase program in order to drive up its stock price, a move that will primarily benefit the company’s largest investors.

While the workers in Sioux Falls face enemies in their union and the company, they also have powerful allies. The situation unfolding at the Smithfield plant is being played out in plants, factories and warehouses throughout the US and in fact, around the world.

Nearly 3,000 workers at Volvo’s New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia, have been on strike since June 7 after decisively voting down two pro-company contracts pushed by their union, the United Auto Workers (UAW). Over the course of their struggle it became clear to the workers that if a struggle was to be carried out against the company and for their livelihoods, they would have to take matters into their own hands. With the help of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Volvo workers organized themselves independently into the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC).

Similarly, Warrior Met coal miners in Brookwood, Alabama, massively voted down a contract backed by their union, the United Mine Workers of America. 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.

There is no doubt that there is massive opposition among workers in the Smithfield plant. Over the past several weeks there have been huge rates of

absenteeism, with hundreds of workers out on long-term medical leave. Scores more are quitting every week. We urge Smithfield workers to draw the necessary conclusions from the current situation and the events of the last year and vote “no” on this second sellout deal. Moreover, workers must understand that if a struggle is to be waged for their lives and livelihoods it requires new organizations, independent of the unions and both political parties.

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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