

600 Topeka, Kansas Frito-Lay workers strike after rejecting union-negotiated deal

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Nearly 600 Topeka, Kansas Frito-Lay workers have walked out on strike after overwhelmingly voting down the latest contract proposal negotiated by the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union (BCTGM) and PepsiCo, Frito-Lay's parent company. Workers voted on Saturday 353 to 30 to authorize strike.

Workers at the nearly 600,000-square-foot Frito-Lay facility, which sits on 188 acres of land and employs approximately 1,050 people, manufacture potato chips and other snacks. The previous two-year agreement expired in September of 2020 and was extended through Sunday. The union waited months before calling a strike vote. Workers are striking for better wages, improved benefits and against forced overtime.

Topeka Frito-Lay workers have now defied several attempts by the company and the union to force through a sell-out contract. The latest rejection of the tentative agreement by workers is the fourth to be voted down since negotiations began. In June, workers rejected the third rotten deal including a *one percent wage increase* with bonuses.

Speaking to local Kansas news station *13 NEWS*, Mark Benaka, business manager for BCTGM Local 218, said the latest tentative contract contained "economic and noneconomic items," which included caps on forced overtime per week and a two percent pay raise in each of the two years.

The determination of striking Frito-Lay workers is part of a growing wave of militant resistance to the companies and their union collaborators. The Topeka workers find themselves in the same position as 3,000 Volvo workers at the New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia, hundreds of nurses at Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, 2,450 workers at Vale's Sudbury, Ontario mining and processing

complex and more.

According to [payscale.com](https://www.payscale.com) and [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com), wages for Topeka Frito-Lay workers are approximately \$13.25 for temporary employees, between \$18 and \$20 an hour for full-time employees and \$24 for operators. Many workers have told the media they have not received a raise in years.

Stagnant wages are coupled with hazardous working conditions and the indifference of management to worker injuries. Local union President Brent Hall told WIBW-TV that a temp worker fell off while operating a forklift that then "rolled up onto her leg," and admitted, "This is something we let [Frito-Lay] do, we let them bring in a temporary company because they were skilled drivers, let them drive the forklifts and then, here is somebody don't know what they're doing."

Cheri Renfro, a union trustee, asserted in an opinion piece in the *Topeka Capital-Journal* that when a worker collapsed and died on the line, management had workers simply move the body and put in another coworker to keep the line going.

Such conditions are the outcome of sellouts by the union. In a comment to a local news station, Benaka reveals the role of the union in keeping wages down: "It's gotten to this point because the membership has endured three contracts now with substandard wage increases. The company has really held out on wage increases. All the employees deserve better and they're fighting for it."

But who negotiated these contracts? BCTGM Local 218.

Union leaders are well aware of the anger among Topeka workers. Chief Union Steward Dan Negrete nervously told KSNT News, "Frito-Lay has never seen a strike. From my understanding, the whole time Frito-

Lay has been in Topeka, there's never been a strike here." He added, "The membership, the body at the plant, the environment at the plant has never been this toxic." The local union was organized in 1973.

John Nave, executive vice president of Kansas AFL-CIO, to which BCTGM Local 218 is affiliated, said of the strike: "It's kind of like the last line of defense. And that's a hard decision because it affects many, many people. Union members don't want to do that... But when the company fails to do a fair negotiation at the bargaining table—and history has shown [Frito-Lay has] repeatedly failed to do that—then there's no other alternative."

Workers are determined to fight. A 26-year employee at the plant told the *Capital-Journal* Monday morning that "I've been waiting for this for a quarter of a century," she said. "They need to change their ways."

In a statement, Frito-Lay officials lambasted the union leadership for not being able to force its membership to toe the line and said: "That the union membership rejected this fully recommended agreement suggests union leadership is out of touch with the sentiments of Frito-Lay employees. Because the union had fully recommended our tentative agreement, we do not anticipate any further negotiations with the union for the foreseeable future."

The BCTGM leadership comprises bureaucrats whose lives and incomes resemble those of corporate CEOs, not Frito-Lay workers. The top five leaders in the BCTGM all make over \$200,000 a year, with BCTGM's previous president, David Durkee, taking home a total annual compensation valued at \$299,224.

Underneath them are some twenty union officials, with job descriptions ranging from representative to news media director and so on, whose take-home pay does not drop below \$100,000 a year. The BCTGM is an arm of corporate management, which has done everything, and will continue to do everything, to undermine workers' militancy and suffocate their efforts.

Following the company's first bankruptcy filing in 2004, the BCTGM worked closely with Hostess Brands, the bakery company, to push through concessions worth \$110 million a year, including changes in the health and welfare plan that left pensions badly underfunded. The company closed 21 plants and slashed its workforce from 35,000 employees to

18,000. The BCTGM would work with Hostess to facilitate the company's bankruptcy, shattering the lives of thousands of workers.

Frito-Lay workers must take this struggle into their own hands and follow the lead 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. Workers should appeal to brothers and sisters at neighboring plants and factories for support. 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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