Former Topeka Frito-Lay worker speaks out on issues behind strike: “Some employees went months without a day off”

Marcus Day
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Shortly after midnight on Monday, nearly 600 workers at Frito-Lay, a subsidiary of food and beverage giant PepsiCo, walked out at the company’s plant in Topeka, Kansas, the state capital. Workers struck after voting down a contract proposal for the fourth time this year, a deal backed by the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers & Grain Millers (BCTGM) union.

Workers at Frito-Lay are fighting to put an end to years of stagnating, poverty-level wages, along with brutal mandatory overtime schedules, problems which are faced by ever-broader sections of the working class.

The walkout at Frito-Lay, the first at the Topeka plant since at least the early 1970s, is part of a growing wave of opposition to joint company-union demands for concessions. At Volvo Trucks in Virginia, some 2,900 workers are set to vote this Friday on the third United Auto Workers-backed deal this year. Workers twice voted down union-endorsed agreements by approximately 90 percent, with workers forming the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight against the UAW’s betrayal of their struggle.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently corresponded over Facebook with Kayla, who worked at the Frito-Lay Topeka plant for several years until last month, and who provided an extensive account of the issues workers confront there. The comments have been edited for clarity.

The WSWS encourages other Frito-Lay workers to contact us to share their stories and discuss how to organize to win their demands.

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I started out as a picker in GES [Geographic Enterprise System, a Frito-Lay production system] as a temporary employee, making $13.25 per hour. In that particular department, it wasn’t unusual to work six days a week, 12 hour shifts a day during the summer. But it also wasn’t uncommon to be forced out early during the winter, resulting in less than 40-hour weeks.

In January of 2016 a new contract resulted in full-time wages dropping from $20 an hour to $15 an hour. I obtained a full-time position at $15 an hour, while others were grandfathered in at $20 an hour. Due to making less than that amount, I switched to a new department and started making $19.91 an hour. Due to a high turnover rate, Frito-Lay decided to increase their full-time wage to $18 an hour. It is now 2021, and they have lost $2 an hour in the last six years, from 2015 to 2021.

Now, I was quite fortunate with the staffing in the department that I transferred to. The forced overtime was minimal compared to some of the troubled areas, like forklift drivers, warehouse workers, picker loaders, and currently still GES.

Whenever a new contract is negotiated, there typically is a minor wage increase, but those wage increases do not occur throughout the plant. Some departments have not received a wage increase in a decade. The more common areas of wage increases are packaging machine operators, specialist positions, and maintenance mechanics.

There’s a lot of different true stories floating around about events that occurred at Frito-Lay Topeka. Some I had seen through my own eyes, such as working during dense, smoky conditions. In processing, oil can burn or even catch on fire, causing clouds of smoke. No sprinklers go off, there’s no evacuation procedure, no fire department being contacted. There are videos circulating of this happening. To my knowledge, it occurred three times within a year.

COVID-19 brought a whole new stress level to everyone. Everyone is struggling with COVID-19. Everyone locally in each community.

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COVID-19 numbers grew rapidly. The number one Frito-Lay plant is located in Texas. During a brief time frame, that plant shut down. All other Frito-Lay plants in the United States overproduced to help compensate for the loss of our number one plant.

Frito-Lay Topeka never shut down for COVID-19 cases. We would have 40 employees out per shift out of a shift of 120. We did have a temporary hazard pay of $20 per day. This lasted about a month. If I remember correctly, it developed after the government lockdown. Frito-Lay did tighten up the policy, requiring two COVID-19 tests to be conducted five days apart. Both had to come back negative before coming back to work. This was a requirement even when tests were limited in health care offices. Nurses had a hard time giving out one test, let alone two.

It speak volumes about Frito-Lay that even though our plant is ranked number two in production, we received zero bonuses this year. This is the first year that I've encountered no bonus. This was due to not obtaining our numbers. Yet, salary employees receive recognition, "We're awesome management." That was a slap to the face for the hourly employees.

Our last, best, final offer, before striking, would have resulted in a 2 percent increase for two years. That's similar to $0.36 raise a year, maybe $0.46, depending on your department. They also offered a maximum of 60 hours of forced overtime per week. That's similar to working five days a week, 12-hour shifts. The other addition to the offer was no more "forced suicides." A "suicide" is being forced to stay over four hours from your scheduled shift, and being forced four hours in early the next day. That results in only an eight-hour break between shifts.

When you learn to navigate the system, it's not that bad of [an attendance] policy. However, if there is severe weather, such as a tornado warning, that does not qualify as an excused absence. An excused absence would have to have a state-issued road closure, usually due to ice. You would have to present proof if Frito-Lay wasn't already aware of the road closure.

They post overtime lists two hours before the end of your scheduled shift to inform you if you have to remain an extra four hours later. If you are forced to stay over, your name will be highlighted with an "F" next to it. If you volunteered for overtime, you will have a "V" next to you name.

A two-hour notice is a bummer. It doesn't allow much notice for planning for babysitters. For a few months, I had set up a room at my home for babysitters to stay the night for days I was forced to work until 3 a.m. I worked second shift for over three years. On numerous occasions, employees will have to cancel plans last minute with friends and family members, or not make plans at all. My daughter is a toddler, she doesn't understand it when I'm not with her.

Our managers follow a different schedule system than hourly employees. They are not forced an extra four hours per day, along with weekends. Some managers dedicate their time and stay when they deem it "as needed." It still doesn't pan out to be an equivalent value of hours that the employees are FORCED to work. Our money is handled by our CEO, Steven Williams. Mr. Williams may not have been CEO this entire time. But he makes the money now. He is our handler.

There's many other issues that have occurred at Frito-Lay. During my time there, I was a more fortunate employee. Some employees went months without a day off due to forced overtime. Sure, you can call in and give yourself a day off, but that's when that point system kicks. You have to have good attendance built up to be able to take a day off without a major penalty.

I quit before the strike was approved. I found a job that's never heard of forced overtime, and "suicide" doesn't even have a place in their dictionary. I participated in the contract votes until I was no longer on the union employee list. I am no longer listed in the system at Frito-Lay, but still participated in pickets.

Quitting Frito-Lay was easier for me than it would be for others. When you invest in a job for a few years versus 20 years, starting over is different.

Frito-Lay employees are struggling. They can't make ends meet on a normal 40-hour week. Overtime is obviously available, but at what cost...? Time. Time can never be gained back, just spent. Our time is valuable and I personally never felt that management or corporate saw that in me.

When your loyal and dependent employees are suffering, from a billion-dollar company, it really brings out some rage. Lack of money isn't only affecting individuals' cost of life, it also affects our families, our neighbors, and our community.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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