

Kansas Frito-Lay workers join growing strike wave of US workers against rising prices and intolerable work conditions

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Nearly 600 workers at the Frito-Lay snack food production plant in Topeka, Kansas walked out Monday, joining a growing number of striking workers who are demanding substantial pay increases to keep up with the rising cost of living and an end to intolerable levels of mandatory overtime, punitive attendance systems and other management abuses.

Striking workers hit the picket lines carrying home-made signs that highlighted the almost universal grievances of workers in the US and internationally. “Cost of living goes up while our pay stays the same,” read one, while another said, “Frito-Lay High Profits-Low Wages.” Others pointed to long hours of labor, including 12 hour shifts, six and seven days a week. “A strike shouldn’t be the only reason we get a holiday off” one worker’s sign read, while another read, “Mandatory Overtime—Where is my family time?”

Like the striking Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia, Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states, and the St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts, the Frito-Lay workers are also in a conflict with a pro-company union. In the last year alone, the Frito-Lay workers have voted down four contracts backed by Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) Local 218, including one last weekend.

The latest proposal for a two-year contract, worked out between Frito-Lay, owned by PepsiCo, and the union under the direction of a federal mediator, included an annual raise of just two percent, well below the rate of inflation, currently about five percent a year.

A Frito-Lay worker who recently quit after six years because of the abusive conditions told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the BCTGM signed a contract in January 2016 that cut full-time wages from \$20 an hour to \$15 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 workers have lost two dollars an hour over the last six years, from 2015 to 2021.”

Due to a shortage of workers willing to work for the near poverty wages, the BCTGM has also allowed the company to impose almost limitless mandatory overtime, including what workers call the “Suicide Shift.” Under this abusive scheme, management tells workers after their eight-hour shift to work another four hours and to return to work four hours early the next day. This means two consecutive 12-hour shifts, with only eight hours off in between, minus travel time to and from work, which could be hours.

If a worker turns down an overtime shift, they can be docked attendance points, preventing them from taking time off without repercussion or transferring to higher-paying positions. Because of these schedules, some workers are forced to sleep in their cars between shifts. The relentless pressure and time away from home has also led to the breakup of marriages and several suicides.

In an impassioned Facebook post, the son of a long-time Frito-Lay worker said, “Employees are mentally and physically drained, and there’s no sign of relief because wages aren’t high enough to motivate anybody in their right mind to start working there as a new employee with the current forced overtime, so the people who have stayed the longest have no choice but to endure or be fired and lose the benefits they have worked for so many years.”

He added that the company’s threat to cut off health care was “a thinly veiled threat of death and/or financial ruin...Their employees are treated worse than machinery and are expected to sacrifice the majority of their waking life at work while PepsiCo’s CEO makes about 16 million

dollars a year, and the rest of the company's shareholders have enjoyed record stock prices as recently as the last few days..."

According to PepsiCo's 2020 annual report, the company paid out \$7.5 billion in cash to shareholders through dividends and share repurchases, delivering "an 11.7 percent increase in total shareholder return, a strong showing compared to other consumer staples."

The BCTGM did not release the breakdown of the vote on the last contract, but it acknowledged that approximately 400 workers had "overwhelmingly" rejected the deal. Before the July 3 vote, workers also rejected union-backed deals on June 18, May 15, and March 31, with the latter being turned down by a margin of 265-36.

PepsiCo management responded to the vote by denouncing BCTGM for failing to get the workers to swallow yet another concessionary deal. In a statement to 13 NEWS, a company spokesperson said, "Though each member of the union negotiating committee, including the union president, individually committed to supporting the agreement and encouraging Frito-Lay employees to vote in favor of ratifying it and Frito-Lay urged all associates to vote in favor of the fully recommended agreement, the agreement was voted down Saturday, July 3...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 statement by the PepsiCo executives was strikingly similar to a statement by Volvo Vice President Franky Marchand after Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia rejected a contract backed by the United Auto Workers by a 9-to-1 margin last month. "It is difficult to understand this action," he said. "UAW International, Regional, and Local leadership endorsed the tentative agreement, which provided significant economic improvements for all UAW-represented workers."

The problem for the corporate bosses is that they may have had an agreement from the union executives, but they did not have an agreement with the Frito-Lay or Volvo workers. After decades of union-backed concessions and a pandemic that has seen the lives and health of countless workers sacrificed for corporate profit, there is a new mood of militancy and determination in the working class.

According to the School of Industrial and Labor

Relations at Cornell University, last month workers launched 22 strikes in the US, including seven manufacturing strikes. These struggles are increasingly taking the form of a direct confrontation with the corporatist trade unions, which are led by executives who personally benefit from the ever-greater rise of the stock market. The rise in the stock market in turn depends on the relentless exploitation and impoverishment of the working class.

BCTGM President Anthony Shelton pocketed a salary of \$288,502 last year, plus whatever returns he got on investments.

The opposition of workers is also being fueled by the sharp rise in prices. AAA said on Tuesday that gas prices were expected to increase another 10 to 20 cents through the end of August, bringing average prices to as much as \$3.33 a gallon, from \$3.05 a month ago. For workers, this will mean it will cost \$53.28 to fill up a typical sedan, or \$86.58 for a pickup truck.

The ruling class is seeking to beat back a potential "wages push" by workers through the introduction of new labor-saving technology and ending supplemental unemployment benefits to "tip the advantage back toward the employers," as the *New York Times* wrote recently. Workers, with the assistance of the WSWS, are building new organizations of struggle independent of the unions to begin an industrial and political counter-offensive.

A striking Volvo Trucks worker in Virginia and member of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee called for the unity of all workers in struggle: "I would say to the Frito Lay workers: don't take any of these contracts. Stay the course and do whatever you have to do to win. You may have never struck before and might be scared, but you can talk to our committee, and we can give you advice on how to handle the union officials and your strike.

"We've talked to teachers, school bus drivers, Mack Truck workers, autoworkers and Amazon workers. We all need to link up. The top pay at Frito Lay is only around \$22. No one can live on that. We all need to come together and bring this thing to a head. We should be fighting together."



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