

Striking Kansas Frito-Lay workers to receive \$105 a week, union bureaucrats to receive thousands

George Gallanis
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To learn more about how to start a rank-and-file committee, Frito-Lay workers can email fritolayrfc@gmail.com or text (785) 816-1505.

On Tuesday, the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) Local 218 revealed that the nearly 600 striking workers at the Frito-Lay snack food production plant in Topeka, Kansas, who walked out Monday, will receive strike pay in the form of \$105 per week—starting next week.

Speaking to news channel WIBW, Brad Schmidt, international representative for BCTGM Local 218, announced the poverty strike pay of \$105 would be given out for only 10 weeks. The \$420 a month in total strike pay is less than half the poverty level for one person. Workers, moreover, have already had their health insurance cut off by Frito-Lay.

Schmidt said, “Frito cut it off the day we walked, which they can do, but they have to point you in the direction of COBRA health insurance. The company has to make it available to you for 18 months but the cost of it so high people can’t afford it,” he explained. “There’s still Obamacare, we can look into that, try to get that set up and then with Kansans, we’re trying to see if they’re available for KanCare for their dependents.”

Schmidt, whose most recent total annual compensation was \$213,803, however avoids the most glaring contradiction: why is the BCTGM handing out paychecks—which workers have not received yet—that are so low workers are not even able to purchase emergency health coverage such as COBRA?

The BCTGM controls tens of millions of dollars in assets. In 2020, according to the union’s LM-2 tax filing, the BCTGM had net assets of over \$36,486,164.

Its expenditures included a total of \$3,473,558 in so-called “representational activities,” or salaries for the union bureaucracy. Among the top officials, union president Anthony Shelton took home a salary of \$288,502 last year, secretary treasurer David Wood made \$273,269 and vice president Roger Miller received \$222,612. Meanwhile, the total money spent on strike benefits last year was zero.

If the Frito-Lay strike lasts for more than 10 weeks, workers’ total strike pay would max out at under \$630,000, or less than one-fifth of what the national staff of the union makes in a year. While the BCTGM plans to starve workers on the picket lines, it is continuing to pay out thousands of dollars to its staff every week.

The union does not want to strike, and it does not want to spend its money on it. It is seeking to starve the strike by forcing workers to live on poverty wages and force them to accept a concessionary contract.

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.

After workers rejected four contracts, the union was compelled to call a strike. In doing so, it hopes to let off steam from workers while it conspires behind the scenes to broker another deal with Frito-Lay.

The BCTGM has not publicized the strike. As of this writing, it has not posted about Frito-Lay workers on its national Facebook page and has not published a word on its website. It is keeping its members in the dark out

of real fear that if its membership is made aware of the strike, it may spark a rebellion.

This is why this struggle must be taken out of the hands of the union and placed solely into the control of rank-and-file workers. This requires the formation of a Frito-Lay Rank-and-File Committee.

This committee will be the genuine voice of Frito-Lay rank-and-file workers and issue and fight for demands based on their needs, not what the company or union thinks they can afford.

The conduct of the struggle and the negotiations cannot be left in the hands of the BCTGM.

The struggle at Frito-Lay is part of a growth of strikes and class struggle in the US and internationally. From 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, to striking food delivery workers in Berlin, to name only a few, workers are fighting for better and safe working conditions and higher living standards but confront the resistance of both their employers and the unions.

In order to fight Frito-Lay, a subsidiary of PepsiCo., a multibillion-dollar international corporation with factories across the world, workers need an international strategy and organization of their own. The struggle at Frito-Lay must be placed into the hands of workers and linked up with workers at factories and workplaces in Kansas, across the United States, including striking Volvo workers, and PepsiCo factories across the world.

We urge workers at Frito-Lay to take up this fight and build the Frito-Lay Workers Rank-and-File Committee today.

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