

Striking Topeka Frito-Lay workers: Form a rank-and-file strike committee to expand the fight for higher wages!

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To get in touch with someone at the World Socialist Web Site to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee, Frito-Lay workers can email fritolayrfc@gmail.com or text (785) 816-1505.

Nearly 600 workers are reaching the end of the first week of their strike at snack giant Frito-Lay's Topeka, Kansas, plant.

Frito-Lay workers have already demonstrated immense courage and resolve, having voted down four contract proposals this year, with the latest deal including an insulting below-inflation raise of just 2 percent, after years of wage freezes. The agreement also would have largely maintained the despised mandatory overtime regime, in which extra shift time is often demanded with just a couple hours' notice, significantly disrupting workers' personal and family lives.

However, the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) union, far from leading a struggle against these conditions, is in fact responsible for them reaching such an intolerable state. By the BCTGM's own admission, many workers have not seen any raise in six to eight years, the result of a string of pro-company contracts negotiated by the union.

The BCTGM, never wanting a strike, extended the previous agreement by approximately nine months before sanctioning the first strike in its nearly 50 years at the plant. Now, it is seeking to isolate the walkout, keeping its tens of thousands of members in the US in the dark about it, while trying to starve workers off the picket lines with just \$105 a week in strike pay.

The struggle can and must be won, but it requires that workers take matters out of the hands of the BCTGM, which has shown that is operating on behalf of the company, not its members.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party urge striking Frito-Lay workers to immediately begin organizing a rank-and-file strike committee, consisting of

the most trusted and militant workers. Such a committee will provide the means to fight for what workers actually need—including substantial raises and decent working hours—not what the company claims is affordable. Moreover, it will lay the basis for strikers at Frito-Lay to link up with workers across the region, throughout the country and around the world who are seeking to reverse decades of stagnating wages and increasingly unbearable working conditions.

The pro-company contracts the BCTGM has been “negotiating” this year are the latest in a long line of sellout agreements. In 2015, the union agreed to a three-year contract that slashed wages for new warehouse employees from \$20 to \$15.54 per hour. The contract also kept wage increases far below inflation, with a raise to base pay of just 1 percent in the third year.

In 2018, the union negotiated a two-year contract with similar paltry increases: a 1 percent wage increase for one year and a lump-sum bonus for the other.

During the same 2018 contract negotiations, union officials claimed they had won concessions from the company that would stop the terrible mandatory overtime policy. But nothing has fundamentally changed.

The union provides no reason to believe that the next deal it brings back will be significantly better. The BCTGM is committed to securing an agreement that meets the company's demands, which means denying workers theirs.

The BCTGM has not publicized the strike or informed its members to garner support. It has not posted about Frito-Lay workers on its national Facebook page and has published nothing on its website. Nor has it issued any serious protest over Frito-Lay's cutoff of workers' health insurance, a vicious move intended to intimidate strikers, which the union is in effect facilitating.

While the BCTGM has stated workers will only receive \$105 a week in strike pay—and for a maximum of 10 weeks at that—union executives and staff will continue to be paid

their full salaries. The BCTGM controls tens of millions of dollars in assets. In 2020, according to the union's LM-2 tax filing, union President Anthony Shelton's total compensation was \$288,502, while Secretary-Treasurer David Wood brought home \$273,269 and Vice President Roger Miller pocketed \$222,612.

The BCTGM had net assets of over \$36,486,164 in 2020. The total money spent on strike benefits that year? \$0.

What are called "unions" today, whether the BCTGM, the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters or others, are far different than the organizations which provided a limited defense of workers' interests in an earlier era. The trade unions now function universally as representatives of the companies, having integrated themselves ever-more deeply into corporate management and the state over the last 40 years. The result has been a disastrous lowering of workers' standard of living.

However, the unions' ability to continue enforcing defeats and pro-corporate agreements is coming to an end.

Volvo Trucks workers in particular have shown the way for how to fight these attacks, organizing the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which is leading the struggle against stagnating pay, higher health costs, attacks on retirees and more.

A striking Volvo Trucks worker in Virginia and member of the VWRFC 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."

With the BCTGM doing everything it can to sabotage the strike now that it has begun, it is necessary for workers to take the initiative, organizing independently and fighting for measures to place the struggle on a serious footing.

First, to sustain the strike, the Frito-Lay Rank-and-File Committee should demand an immediate increase in strike pay, which must be at the level of workers' full income and paid for out the BCTGM's multi-million assets, which are derived from workers dues.

Second, the committee should broadly popularize the demand throughout the working class in Topeka and beyond that Frito-Lay reinstate health care, which workers' families need to live and the company has a responsibility to provide, for the duration of the strike. Until they do, the committee should demand that the BCTGM cover the costs of COBRA extended health care coverage out of its strike fund.

In contrast to what the BCTGM does—take what the company says it can afford and attempt to convince workers to take it—a rank-and-file committee would formulate

demands based on what workers actually need, such as:

- Immediately bringing all workers up to top pay, with a 30 percent raise across the board to make up for the years of wage freezes and stagnation
- An end to all mandatory overtime, including "forced suicide" shifts
- An annual cost of living increase of 6 percent to keep up with spiking inflation

With Frito-Lay parent company PepsiCo paying out \$7.5 billion to its investors in dividends and share buybacks last year alone, there is ample money to meet these demands, and more.

Striking Frito-Lay workers are up against a powerful and experienced corporate conglomerate, which is committed to funneling as much of the wealth produced by workers to shareholders as possible. However, strikers have allies among the working class in the US and around the world that are far more numerous and a potential source of immense collective strength.

The strike emerges as part of a growing movement against the joint corporate-union efforts to impose new attacks on workers, from Volvo Trucks in Virginia, to Warrior Met Coal in Alabama, where striking miners rejected a United Mine Workers-endorsed contract in April by an extraordinary 1,006 to 45 vote, burning copies of the rejected agreement outside the union hall.

The Frito-Lay committee will provide a means to link up and communicate with other rank-and-file committees at Volvo, Mack Trucks, Amazon, the auto plants and elsewhere, forming a cross-industry and international network of workers to coordinate and prepare a broad counteroffensive to reverse the decades of corporate attacks.

We urge Frito-Lay workers to contact us today to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee at email fritolayrfc@gmail.com or text at (785) 816-1505.



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