

Union to Kansas Frito-Lay workers: Don't ask for wage increases

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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 at Frito-Lay, a subsidiary of food and beverage giant PepsiCo, entered the fifth day of their strike Friday at the company's plant in Topeka, Kansas, the state capital.

Workers walked out after voting down a contract proposal for the fourth time this year, a deal backed by the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) union. Striking Frito-Lay workers are fighting to put an end to years of stagnating, poverty-level wages along with brutal mandatory overtime schedules, problems confronting ever-broader sections of the working class.

The company, committed to maintaining these miserable conditions despite being highly profitable, has moved aggressively against the strikers, cutting off their health insurance. According to a statement released to news station KSNT, Frito-Lay is also moving forward with plans to hire replacements, i.e., scabs, for the duration of their strike.

In the statement, Frito-Lay again reprimanded union officials for failing to secure passage of their deal with the company: "Frito-Lay and BCTGM Union Local 218 met last week and reached a fully recommended two-year agreement that included across-the-board wage increases both years of the contract and improved work rules that would have reduced overtime and hours worked. 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 (after nine months of negotiations), 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."

A striking Kansas Frito-Lay worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Frito-Lay management posted leaflets all around the plant, encouraging us to accept the deal." The worker said he believed that the statements were coordinated between the company and the BCTGM, however. "No doubt it was probably collaborated by executives on both sides.

"Before we actually went on strike [BCTGM Midwest Region International Vice President] Brad Schmidt was walking around the plant asking what we wanted in the contract, but told us money was off the table during negotiations, basically, don't ask for raises! They weren't going to give us the increases we wanted.

"From what I've heard they pressured the local union leadership to agree to accept an unseen offer that was the 2 percent raise we saw in the latest contract," he said.

As vice president for BCTGM, Schmidt's most recent total annual compensation was \$213,803, over five times the annual pay of a Frito-Lay worker making \$20 an hour. Schmidt recently told news channel WIBW that striking workers will receive strike pay of \$105 for only 10 weeks. The \$420 a month in total strike pay is less than half the poverty level for one person.

The BCTGM, far from mobilizing a serious defense against the company's moves to hire scabs and cut off health care, has instead let them take place without any significant sign of protest.

While the union is parroting the company's line that there is not enough money for significant raises, Frito-Lay's parent company PepsiCo paid out \$7.5 billion to its investors in dividends and share buybacks last year alone. It has also spent billions in recent years acquiring new businesses, including:

- 2020: Rockstar energy drinks (\$3.85 billion)
- 2020: Hangzhou Haomusi Food (\$705 million)
- 2019: Popcorners snack maker BFY Brands (undisclosed terms)
- 2019: South Africa's Pioneer Food Group (\$1.7 billion)

- 2018: SodaStream (\$3.2 billion)

The pro-company contracts the BCTGM has been “negotiating” this year are the latest in a series of sellout agreements. In 2015, the union agreed to a three-year contract that cut 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 increases of 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.

“I was working 12-hour shifts, seven days a week,” the worker said. “There was no time for socializing, seeing friends, family, or anything.

“If you wanted a day off, you had to collect points. Positive points, let’s say, ‘+2,’ meant you had two days off. It takes about 30 days to accrue one point. But if you hadn’t accrued a point and you took a day off, you would have a point deducted, ‘-1.’ If you missed, let’s say, four days and didn’t have the points, you would have ‘-4’ points, and that would often be beyond the threshold, resulting in punishment from the company.

“So if it takes 30 days to accrue one point, the company would force you to work 120 days straight without a day off, or they would fire you. This was agreed to by the union.”

He continued: “The union and the company agreed to allegedly end this by bringing in new workers through a hiring agency called Capstone. The idea was that these workers would work some of the days and hours for us and we could get back to working normal shifts. Instead, the company used Capstone to double their production. They ramped up. They had us and the agency employees working at the same time.”

As its endless series of company-friendly agreements show, the BCTGM has not been “negotiating” on workers’ behalf, but rather conspiring with the company over how to pass a contract that will allow Frito-Lay to continue extracting the maximum amount of profits.

If the strike is to be won, and it can and must, then it requires workers take matters out of the hands of the BCTGM.

The fierce determination of Frito-Lay workers to reject yet another concessionary agreement is itself part of a broader growing rebellion by workers in the US and in other countries against low wages, rising health care costs and deteriorating working conditions, which have been enforced by the trade unions in one sellout after another.

On Friday, striking Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia

voted down a third pro-company contract backed by the United Auto Workers (UAW), courageously defying company and union threats. Opposition to the UAW-company deals has been led by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which is fighting to expand the strike and win back what workers have lost over decades.

The actions of Volvo workers have inspired their brothers and sisters overseas, with Belgian Volvo Cars workers carrying out wildcat work stoppages on Thursday and Friday against efforts to extend their working hours.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call on striking Frito-Lay workers to follow in the footsteps of Volvo workers and immediately begin organizing a rank-and-file strike committee, composed of the most militant and trusted workers. In opposition to what the BCTGM does—enforce the dictates of the company onto workers—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

The urgent task facing such a rank-and-file committee at Frito-Lay would be to link up with striking workers elsewhere, including Volvo autoworkers, Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama, health care workers in Chicago and Massachusetts, and others, as well as mobilizing workers throughout Frito-Lay and PepsiCo’s operations, as part of a new movement to defend workers’ common interests to good-paying, safe and decent jobs.

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