

Kansas Frito-Lay workers complete 15th day of strike as union and company resume negotiations

George Gallanis
19 July 2021

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 fritolayfc@gmail.com or text (785) 816-1505.

Close to 600 Frito-Lay workers completed their 15th day of striking as negotiations between the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) union and Frito-Lay, a subsidiary of food and beverage giant PepsiCo, resumed Monday in Topeka, Kansas, the state capital.

Years of stagnating, poverty-level pay, combined with brutal mandatory overtime schedules are fueling the strike. Workers struck after rejecting the fourth contract proposal this year, another sellout agreement supported by the union.

The Kansas Frito-Lay strike has made its way to national news, with major news outlets like the *Washington Post* reporting on it. The strike is also leading to shortages of the popular snack food in Topeka and beyond.

Among those professing support for the Frito-Lay workers was Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who tweeted on Saturday his support of the strike. However, rather than solidarizing with the workers, Sanders is solidarizing with the BCTGM bureaucracy, which has repeatedly tired to push through sellout deals.

The two sides that are meeting to negotiate the livelihood of hundreds of Frito-Lay workers are a multi-billion dollar corporation with an insatiable thirst to make as much money as possible, and a well-heeled union bureaucracy that has brought to the membership four pro-company contracts that have been overwhelmingly rejected. Both are completely out of touch with the needs of the Frito-Lay workers.

The company is intent on bringing the strike to a quick end by cutting off workers health insurance while the union starves workers on strike pay of \$105 a week over 10 weeks. The \$420 a month in total strike pay is less than half the poverty level for one person, and is not enough to purchase medical insurance.

The announced cuts to workers' health insurance come as PepsiCo's latest quarterly earnings report shows the company made over \$2.36 billion in profits, an increase of \$1.65 billion from 2020. The company's revenue rose by over 20 percent due to an increase in restaurant demand for Pepsi products.

The money PepsiCo hands out in dividends demonstrates the company has more than enough resources to meet the demands of workers. PepsiCo investors were handed over \$7.5 billion in dividends in 2020. On July 15, the PepsiCo Board of Directors announced a quarterly dividend of \$1.075 per share of PepsiCo common stock, a 5 percent increase compared to the same time last year.

While BCTGM starves workers, doling out a pittance in strike pay, the union is sitting on tens of millions of dollars in assets. The lowest-paid Frito-Lay workers would need a 400 percent raise for their salary to match the salaries of top BCTGM union leaders.

In 2020, according to the union's LM-2 tax filing, the BCTGM had net assets of over \$36,486,164. So-called "representational activities," or salaries for the union bureaucracy, equaled \$3,473,558. Among the top union leaders, union president Anthony Shelton received a salary of \$288,502 last year, secretary treasurer David Wood took in \$273,269 and vice president Roger Miller made \$222,612. Zero was spent on strike benefits.

As talks resume, workers are being kept totally in the dark. The union has not discussed what demands they are raising nor have they called for meetings with workers. When asked if the union had informed workers of their plans, a striking Frito-Lay worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “No, not really. I know we’re asking for an immediate wage bump across all classes in the terms of dollars, not percentages. Other than that, no specifics.

“They haven’t held a meeting per se, but our union shop stewards know we want to at least be paid the same amount or better as similar jobs in our area. So, like a match to target. I’m not sure how they’re going to navigate the non-economics. I feel like everyone is more or less on the same page of what we want, it’s just a matter of how negotiations go and the wording in the contract.

“I know that for me to vote yes it’s going to take at least \$28.75 as new wage for my current classification and 3.5 percent yearly for cost-of-living. At the very least.” Current hourly wages range from \$18.35 to \$34.82 per hour, depending on job classification.

The union has not held meetings to discuss the demands of workers because it is not negotiating on their behalf, but on behalf of corporate management. Management dictated the last four contracts.

The brutal working conditions and low pay that Frito-Lay workers are rebelling against are the consequences of a series of concessionary contracts rammed through by the BCTGM. In multiple interviews and videos, BCTGM leaders admitted that many workers have not seen any raise in six to eight years.

The BCTGM avoided a strike for as long as possible, extending the previous agreement by approximately nine months before mounting pressure from workers forced them to call the first strike at the plant in nearly 50 years.

To win a decent contract workers must take negotiations out of the hands of the BCTGM and put it under the control of rank-and-file workers. This requires the formation of a Frito-Lay Rank-and-File Committee.

A rank-and-file committee should formulate demands based on what workers need, not on what the BCTGM and Frito-Lay say workers must accept. This should include, at minimum, contract negotiations broadcast live to all workers. Striking workers must be able to

listen to the discussions being held between the union and the company and be able to participate in them.

Moreover, for workers to sustain themselves during the strike workers must be able to afford health care, groceries, pay their mortgages and meet other expenses. This requires that strike pay be increased to a level based on workers normal income.

The struggle at Frito-Lay is part of a growing wave of strikes in the US and internationally. From recently striking Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia, Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama to striking food delivery workers in Berlin, workers are fighting for improvements in their working conditions and higher living standards in the face of bitter opposition by employers and the unions.

To successfully pursue their fight against Frito-Lay, a subsidiary of PepsiCo., a multibillion-dollar international corporation with factories across the world, workers need an international strategy. A rank-and-file committee must seek to link up Frito-Lay workers with workers at other factories and workplaces in Kansas, across the United States and PepsiCo facilities globally.

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

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.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact