

Topeka Frito-Lay workers: Vote NO on the latest company-BCTGM backroom deal! Form a rank-and-file committee to expand and win the strike!

Marcus Day
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To contact the World Socialist Web Site to discuss organizing a rank-and-file strike committee, Frito-Lay workers can email fritolayrfc@gmail.com or text (785) 816-1505.

Late Wednesday, the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers union (BCTGM) announced that it had reached another tentative agreement with snack-food giant Frito-Lay covering the company's Topeka, Kansas, plant, where over 500 workers have been striking since July 5. The union is forcing a vote on the deal this Friday, giving workers no time to truly study or understand what they're voting on.

Workers have the right to know everything that is in this deal, and they should demand the release of the full contract and a week to study and discuss it before any vote. If the BCTGM attempts to hold the vote anyway, workers should decisively reject the contract on principle.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party urge workers at Frito-Lay to move immediately to form a rank-and-file strike committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the BCTGM, which has repeatedly shown that it is conspiring with the company to maintain the low-wage, highly exploitative status quo.

Already, every indication is that the proposed contract, the fifth brought back by BCTGM Local 218, is little changed from its four previous sellout agreements. Workers at the plant courageously and overwhelmingly voted down those deals because they failed to overcome years of stagnating or frozen pay and intolerable work schedules, including grueling mandatory overtime. The most recent contract backed by the union included just two 2 percent annual wage increases, far below the current inflation rate in consumer goods of 5.4 percent, and therefore amounting to an effective wage cut.

Workers have already taken to social media to call for a "no" vote, based on the little information they've been able to glean about the deal. One wrote on Facebook, "It's still not a good contract! They can still force us [to work] six days a week, 12 [hours], only one day off! NO!"

A Frito-Lay worker in the Topeka area who is not part of the same bargaining unit as the strikers told the WSWS that he believes deal should be rejected, saying it is virtually the same contract as before. "Frito-Lay offered them 2 percent first year and 2 percent second year on the first offer. This offer was for 3 percent first year and 1 percent second year, so basically the same offer as before. I don't know why they would accept basically the same thing they turned down before."

He continued, "Not a big fan of their union. My opinion is they want them back to work so they have the union dues coming in. The union had wanted them to sign the last deal, but enough of the workers had the balls to say we've had enough of these crappy deals, and I don't blame them. I hate seeing these big union guys making \$200,000 a year and these workers making a \$100 a week in [strike] pay."

"I know that for me to vote yes it's going to take at least large wages increases for all workers and yearly raises that stay above inflation," a striking worker told the WSWS, expressing the widespread determination to substantially raise pay. "At the very least, until they get there it's no votes."

A statement issued Thursday by Frito-Lay, aimed at pressuring workers to accept the contract, nevertheless provides a window into the even greater collaboration between the union and the company it would entail. Frito-Lay wrote, "We've spent the last three days jointly revisiting the terms of the prior offer and have aligned on a new offer that will better address employee concerns around guaranteed days off and create additional opportunities for the union to have input into staffing and overtime."

"We believe this offer addresses the most pressing issues raised by our employees, and we believe it represents a win-win for both the union and Frito-Lay. We are urging employees to ratify this offer so they can end the strike and return to work."

In other words, the BCTGM would be integrated even further into the framework of management and granted a greater role in overseeing the conditions of workers' exploitation, inevitably

giving its further blessing to understaffing and mandatory overtime, representing a “win-win” for Frito-Lay and the BCTGM, but nothing but a further loss for workers.

Notably, Frito-Lay added that it would not release details of the agreement “at the request of the union.” The joint company-union effort to keep workers in the dark on the terms of the deal can only be aimed getting it rammed through and ending the strike.

BCTGM, for its part, is already seeking to lower workers’ expectations for the latest contract, with Brad Schmidt, vice president of Local 218, stating, “We never get everything we want, just like the company never does. That’s why we’ve got negotiations. But I think it’s going to be a package the majority of people are going to support and be happy with.” However, with the BCTGM endorsing four concessions deals already, why should workers place any trust in their word that the latest offer will be fundamentally better?

Just two days before the latest contract touted by the BCTGM was announced, Frito-Lay issued a letter to workers again pushing the terms in its previous proposals. Significantly, the company stated that it was the *union* that proposed only a 2 percent per year wage increase in the previous agreement. This is not surprising, however, given that the union has accepted contract after contract with below-inflation raises, with some workers reporting their pay rose only 77 cents over the last 12 years.

The intolerable situation workers are fighting to overturn is the outcome of decades in which the BCTGM has suppressed opposition and strikes and colluded with the company to enforce its will.

Frito-Lay’s parent, multinational food and beverage conglomerate PepsiCo, is reaping billions in profits during the pandemic and funneling billions more to its investors. There is more than enough money to satisfy workers’ needs. But to win their demands, workers require a fighting organization which defends their interests as unrelentingly as the company pursues its.

For the strike to succeed, the following is needed:

1. The latest sellout contract proposal, worked out between the BCTGM and the company behind workers’ backs, must be overwhelmingly rejected.

2. A rank-and-file strike committee must be founded, comprised of the most trusted and militant workers. Such a committee would formulate demands based on what workers actually need, such as a 25 percent across-the-board wage increase for all classifications, annual cost-of-living raises of 6 percent to make up for surging inflation, and an end to mandatory overtime over 40 hours.

3. There must be an end to the BCTGM’s secrecy and backroom deals. Trusted delegates from the rank-and-file must oversee any future negotiations between the union and the company, and any new proposal must be released to the whole membership in its entirety at least a week before any vote.

4. Workers must be provided the resources to place the strike on a serious footing. Strike pay must be raised from its current miserable amount of \$105 to the level of workers’ full pay, paid for out of the union international’s tens of millions in assets. Until the company restores workers’ health insurance, COBRA extended health coverage must be covered by the BCTGM.

5. The isolation of the strike imposed by the BCTGM must be broken. Workers in Topeka should appeal to the tens of thousands of Frito-Lay and Pepsi workers in the US and beyond to support their strike and prepare solidarity actions, up to and including a nationwide walkout to shut down Frito-Lay and PepsiCo’s operations. In recent weeks, Pepsi drivers in Indiana have walked out against efforts to raise health care costs, showing again that workers everywhere are facing the same basic issues.

The struggle at Frito-Lay is itself part of a growing rebellion by workers internationally against corporate demands, backed by the trade unions, for workers to continue to sacrifice while the companies and their investors watch their fortunes skyrocket during the pandemic.

The most significant and conscious expression of this broader process has been the months-long struggle by Volvo Trucks workers in southwestern Virginia. Volvo workers repeatedly voted down UAW-backed contracts between May and July and organized the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which exposed the lies of the company and the UAW and led the fight for higher wages and benefits.

The task now is to continue to develop the organization and leadership needed to unify these struggles and lead them to victory. The growing network of rank-and-file committees of autoworkers, Amazon workers, educators, and other workers must be expanded, laying the groundwork for a powerful international movement of the working class to at long last halt and reverse the corporate attacks on workers’ living standards.



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