

“We will continue to fight”

Indiana PepsiCo workers strike continues as union shuts down Frito-Lay workers strike in Kansas

James Martin
25 July 2021

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

More than 100 PepsiCo drivers, merchandisers and delivery workers in Munster, Indiana, have been on strike for more than two weeks against the company's demands for sharp increases in their out-of-pocket health care expenses, forced overtime and stagnant pay.

The strike is continuing as the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers union (BCTGM) shuts down the strike by hundreds of Frito-Lay workers in Topeka, Kansas. Although Frito-Lay is a subsidiary of PepsiCo, neither the BCTGM nor the Teamsters, who represent the workers in Munster, have made any attempt to unite their struggles nor call upon support from the broader workforce of the multinational food conglomerate.

While PepsiCo made over \$70 billion in net revenue in 2020 (up from \$39 billion in 2007), it is demanding a significant increase in out-of-pocket health care expenses from \$14 a week to over \$80 a week by 2025. Teamsters Local 142 had previously accepted a five-year pay freeze in exchange for no increases to workers' health care costs. Many drivers also have variable costs on the road that eat into their income, such as the cost of gas and food, which have increased sharply this year.

Like millions of other workers, the Munster PepsiCo workers have had to work through the dangerous conditions of the pandemic, bottling Pepsi beverages inside the facility and delivering them to the shelves of

grocery stores such as Walmart and Meijer. According to a report by the United Food and Commercial Workers, over 91,400 food and grocery store workers have been infected by COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

The Teamsters local, which covers two bargaining units at the Munster facility, is scabbing on its own membership by forcing the other bargaining unit, which voted separately to ratify its own contract, to remain on the job, leaving the plant operational. The workers who are on strike rejected their own agreement, which had been endorsed by the Teamsters, initiating the strike.

The rejection of the union-recommended contract proposal by the rank-and-file PepsiCo workers is part of a growing rebellion of the working class against union-backed concessions.

Workers at Volvo in Dublin, Virginia, went on strike for five weeks in June and July, voting down union-backed contracts three consecutive times. The United Auto Workers was able to force an end to the strike only by making workers vote again on a contract they had just rejected. The union claimed the contract had passed narrowly, while ignoring workers' demands for a recount.

Elsewhere in the Midwest, workers at packaging company Amcor in Terre Haute, Indiana, voted down two contracts backed by the SEIU-affiliated Workers United union. The union responded by unilaterally imposing a contract without even the pretense of another vote.

Anger among Frito-Lay workers as BCTGM union shuts down strike

Workers at the Frito-Lay facility (a PepsiCo subsidiary) in Topeka began their strike after voting down four previous contracts brought to them by the BCTGM. The union claims that a fifth contract was passed by the narrowest of margins last Friday, after forcing workers to vote without any information or time to study the contract.

The workers went on strike to oppose poverty wages, forced overtime, grueling work schedules called “suicide shifts” and horrendous working conditions, which the BCTGM union facilitated.

There is enormous opposition by Frito-Lay workers to the new contract. The new contract includes wage increases of 3 percent in the first year and 1 percent in the second, for an identical four percent increase over the life of the contract as the previous deal. With inflation currently at over 5 percent, this meager pay increase amounts to a significant pay cut.

The new deal also allows the company to force employees to work 72 hours a week, with only one “guaranteed” day off. At the same time, the BCTGM will be further integrated with management through the creation of a six-person “labor-management” committee.

A driver for Frito-Lay who is not covered by the contract told the WSWS, “I feel for the employees. Union leaders are making over \$200,000 and workers are making \$105 a week. Something is wrong with that.”

Frito-Lay and other workers took to social media to denounce the deal. “For a lot of us the fight is not over and will be even harder once we do go back to work,” one worker said on Facebook. “We all wanted change and it was heartbreaking for me to see all the faces and disappointment knowing it was not a ‘good’ contract but one a lot of us felt forced to take or risk losing your job over. Not an easy decision. We have received so much love and support and encouragement and I hope everyone knows we didn’t want to let them down. We will be going back to work and will continue the fight from inside.”

Stephanie, a wife of a Frito-Lay worker in Topeka, denounced the sellout of the strike on social media. “So

the Frito-Lay strike is over! What does this mean for my family? To be honest I’m terrified the conditions my husband will be returning to will be worse than before! They are coming back to a greedy company who has lost so much production in the past three weeks, so the overtime won’t change. Yes, he is promised one day off a week as long as he doesn’t miss any hours for appointments etc. He is now going back to a plant that has a COVID-19 outbreak.”

Nichole said, “Only one day off a week and a 4 percent raise after 9 years of no raises? This doesn’t seem like a good deal. If people are working 84 hours a week you can hire a whole other shift.”

Jen noted, “I’m so upset for them. I personally feel their union reps failed them on this. Then to be bullied to return to shitty conditions cause their jobs were on the line is completely asinine.”

Another worker added, “I’m sure union higher-ups/reps got a good deal for themselves behind closed doors.” He added, the “union just sold their people out. The only people getting rich in unions is union management.” The worker added, the “union missed the boat on COLA raises. Getting roughly a \$1/hr raise over two years won’t keep up with inflation.”

PepsiCo and Frito-Lay workers can break through the unions’ sabotage of their struggles by forming their own independent rank-and-file committee, following the example set by the courageous fight of the Volvo workers.

By forming such organizations, completely independent of the unions, workers can begin to link up with PepsiCo workers across the world to coordinate a joint struggle against poverty wages and sweatshop working conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact