Chicago Nabisco workers join strike in four US states

James Martin
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Nabisco bakery workers in Chicago, Illinois, have joined a strike of plant workers across four states against brutal working conditions, low pay and a proposed two-tier health care system demanded by management even as the company rakes in record profits. They join workers on strike in Portland, Oregon; Richmond, Virginia; and Aurora, Colorado.

Over 1,000 workers are now currently on strike against Nabisco and its parent company, Mondelez International, Inc., part of a growing rebellion of workers in multiple industries. Over 200 workers in Portland were first to strike on August 10.

Workers at Frito-Lay and its parent company PepsiCo recently struck against low wages, "suicide" work shifts, and higher health care costs in Kansas and Indiana, only to have their struggles betrayed by the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) and the Teamsters. The bakery workers on strike in Chicago also joined the strike of 800 mechanics in the Chicago metropolitan region.

Nabisco workers, who produce and bake Oreo cookies, Ritz crackers and other popular snacks, have been forced to work 12- to 16-hour shifts, sometimes seven days a week, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mondelez is now proposing that workers accept an "Alternative Work Schedule," widely hated and adopted in the auto industry, where workers take on up to 16-hour shifts without overtime pay. The company is also proposing a contract which creates a two-tier health care plan which costs more for all new hires.

While Nabisco workers toiled in gruesome conditions, Mondelez made record profits during the pandemic and made over $26.2 billion in revenue in 2020.

Worker Nathan Williams told *Vice*, "During the pandemic, we came in seven days a week. Some people worked every day—16 hours a day—for three months." Nabisco demanded overtime hours and refused to hire more workers. Workers at Nabisco industrial bakery facilities in the United States and Mexico have faced a relentless assault on their living standards over the past decade, including cuts to pensions, mass layoffs and a constant threat of plant closures.

In 2016, Mondelez demanded that the BCTGM union, which covers the striking Nabisco workers, impose $46 million in concessions upon the Chicago workforce—equivalent to cuts of $23,000 per worker—or it would move production lines to Salinas, Mexico.

Mondelez also demanded an increase of 10 percent to the health care costs to replace the fully paid health care plan and replace the pensions with a 401(k) defined-contribution plan, offloading retirement costs onto workers. By 2018, Mondelez had eliminated the pensions of thousands of retirees and workers and moved them into 401(k) plans.

The BCTGM did nothing to oppose the assault on the Chicago workers, and Mondelez closed nine of 16 production lines at the Southside Chicago facility and laid off more than 400 out of nearly 1,000 workers. Workers making $26 an hour were escorted out of the plant by security guards during the layoffs which workers then described felt like a funeral procession. The company initially threatened to lay off nearly 600 workers. With the threat of layoffs, many higher paid workers at the plant retired early.

Michael, a former Chicago Nabisco worker, spoke out on social media in support of the striking workers. "I stand with you in your stand against corporate greed," he said. "Please be aware that the current buildings you work in are old, and to reinvest in them might be the perfect excuse along with union negotiations that failed to set the ball in motion to let

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Mondelez close them!”

Michael noted that the company has kept the facility dilapidated for years to hang the threat of plant closure over the workers with the complicity of the union. He added, “The Chicago bakery went from 18 ovens to five back in 2017. This was their plan all along, and they are going to let your union leadership hang you all with it.”

Francesca, the daughter of a Chicago Nabisco worker, also said, “My dad told me stories of how back when he first started work at Nabisco in 1960 there were over 4,000 people. Now it’s just a few hundred.”

While Nabisco workers are seeking to fight for more, the BCTGM has sought to spread nationalist anti-Mexican poison, pitting American workers against their brothers and sisters south of the border. The most recent statement by the union states, “Nabisco has long profited from the loyalty and dedication of its U.S. workers and the exploitation of its employees in Mexico. By taking this action, Nabisco workers in all four locations are saying strong and clear: stop exporting our jobs to Mexico and end your demands for contract concessions.”

In fact, Nabisco workers in the US have more in common with their Mexican coworkers than the so-called “union” that claims to represent them.

Workers should put no trust in the BCTGM, which recently brought four consecutive sellout agreements to striking Frito-Lay workers in Kansas. Workers struck against poverty wages and had yet another sellout contract imposed on them after they were given meager strike pay and starved out.

At Nabisco, the BCTGM has worked to impose brutal working conditions on thousands of workers across the country and has overseen the layoff of hundreds of workers over the last decade. One laid off Chicago Nabisco worker, Tony, mockingly said that “[Mondelez] runs the union.” To which Henry, another former worker, respond, “What union?”

Nabisco workers in Illinois, Oregon, Virginia and Colorado should follow the lesson of the Volvo auto workers who boldly took control of their strike independent of the United Auto Workers union and formed a rank-and-file committee. Workers who want to fight against brutal working conditions, forced overtime without pay and concessions to health care should form their own rank-and-file committee independent of the BCTGM and formulate their own demands.

The World Socialist Web Site *will assist in the formation of such a committee. Text (785) 816–1505, or fill out the contact form at wsws.org/workers to learn more.*

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