

As unions force Dana auto parts workers to remain on the job after voting down contract

Kentucky distillery workers launch strike after rejecting concessions contract by 96 percent

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Workers at Bardstown, Kentucky's Heaven Hill Distilleries launched a strike Saturday after voting against a concessions contract almost unanimously the previous day.

Heaven Hill is one of the largest bourbon manufacturers in the world, with annual revenues believed to be around \$500 million. It produces at least ten brands of spirits including Blackheart Rum, Black Velvet Canadian whiskey, Christian Brothers VS Brandy, Deep Eddy Vodka, Elijah Craig 12 Year Old, and Two Fingers Tequila. Evan Williams bourbon is considered the company's flagship brand.

The 460 workers, who are in the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 23D, voted 96.1 percent to reject the company's offer for a five-year contract that included proposals for "non-traditional" work schedules, which would include having to work weekends. It was also reported that the deal eliminated a cap on health insurance premium increases, slicing deeply into take-home pay, and also included cuts to overtime pay. The company also reportedly rejected wage increases for workers, even after a recent \$19 million renovation of the facility's "Bourbon Experience" tourist attraction.

The vote came after the company abandoned negotiations two weeks earlier and after the union had sought the assistance of a federal negotiator in July.

In order to keep production going during the early days of the pandemic when popular anger forced the temporary closure of many industries, Heaven Hill

shifted production towards hand sanitizer in order to classify its workforce as "essential workers." Since then, distillery workers have continued to risk infection and death on the job.

"The schedule is going to take time away from us, and our kids and our families," one worker told local news. "We are going to miss everything. We are going to miss graduation, birthdays; we're going to miss all that stuff (because) we'll be working weekends."

"The bourbon industry has been on a long-running upward trajectory,' the Associated Press reported recently. "Combined U.S. sales for bourbon, Tennessee whiskey and rye whiskey rose 8.2%, or \$327 million, to \$4.3 billion in 2020, despite plunging sales from bars and restaurants due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States reported early this year." And according to the Kentucky Distillers' Association, Kentucky distilleries produce 95 percent of the world's bourbon supply.

"It's no secret that liquor sales have thrived during the coronavirus pandemic, and bourbon is no different," vinepair.com reported. Heaven Hill's Susan Wahl, vice president of American Whiskeys, told the website, "Thirty-three weeks into 2020, and off premise sales of bourbon have already reached \$1.34 billion, according to Nielsen data. The main beneficiaries of this trend have been larger distillers like Heaven Hill. While the company has seen 'huge' sales growth across its portfolio, its core brands including Elijah Craig, Small Batch, Evan Williams,

and Larceny have seen the most notable increases in recent years and during the pandemic. Even brands that were flat before are seeing growth in this environment.”

The strike at Heaven Hill comes as workers at auto parts manufacturer Dana, which operates four plants in Kentucky including two less than an hour away from Bardstown, are locked a struggle over a new contract in which working hours is also a major issue. Dana workers are subjected to a brutal mandatory overtime levels which often forces them to work for weeks at a time before a single day off.

This shows the potential for a broader struggle uniting workers across industries around the country, who are looking for a way to fight back against wage stagnation, overwork and exploitative working conditions. Dana workers and Heaven Hill workers should make direct appeals for the broadest possible support and solidarity with each other.

But the conditions at Dana, which recall those workers faced in the 1800s, are taking place in a “union” shop overseen by the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers. In spite of the fact that Dana workers recently rejected a sellout contract by more than 90 percent, the UAW and USW are forcing them to remain on the job on a day-to-day contract extension. Meanwhile, coronavirus is spreading in Dana facilities around the country, including a reportedly large outbreak involving dozens of workers in the Dry Ridge, Kentucky plant.

The UFCW plays essentially the same role at meatpacking and food processing plants. Throughout the pandemic, it has forced workers to remain on the job at these facilities even in spite of massive outbreaks, which have already claimed the lives of 298 meatpacking workers. In one infamous case, the UFCW local at Tyson's pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa collaborated with management to cook up a “perfect attendance” bonus even as hundreds of workers were falling ill and managers were secretly running a betting pool on how many would ultimately become infected.

While the UFCW was compelled to call a strike by the Heaven Hill's hardline tactics, there is no doubt that it will seek to shut down picket lines as soon as possible on terms favorable to the company. The way forward for distillery workers is to form a rank-and-file committee, as workers at Dana have done, to establish

their own initiative independent of the union and to build up support for their struggle among workers throughout the area and across the country.

The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist. For more information, visit wsws.org/workers.



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