

Judge issues strikebreaking injunction against Kentucky distillery workers

Warren Duzak
22 September 2021

With the strike by distillery workers in Kentucky approaching the end of the second week, Heaven Hill owners have turned to the courts and robbed employees of health insurance to break the strike. Nelson County Circuit Court Judge Charles Simms Tuesday afternoon issued an injunction limiting the actions of picketing workers at the Heaven Hill distillery in Bardstown, Kentucky.

More than 400 workers, members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 23 D (UFCW), walked out September 10 after voting by 96 percent to reject the company's proposed five-year contract, which included higher out-of-pocket health care costs and a new schedule to lengthen the workweek. In the face of the strikebreaking injunction and the cutoff of health benefits, the UFCW continues to isolate the strike keeping union members on the job at the nearby Jim Beam distilleries in Boston and Clermont, Kentucky, where the UFCW sold out a 2016 strike, and other local facilities.

Announcing the cutoff of health care to the strikers and their families—in the middle of a pandemic—management told workers in a letter, “Your current coverage will be reinstated as soon as the work stoppage has ceased, concurrent with the ratification of the new contract, and you have returned to work.

The injunction bars picketers from blocking entrances and gives the company a green light to send strikebreakers through the picket lines. It also prohibits strikers from “tailing” any trucks entering or exiting the distillery and any “harassment of employees at affiliated companies.”

The judge said, “I’m not going to put up with chaos” and urged Heaven Hill management to come back to him if the injunction is violated. “I’m telling you right now, if you have a camera up there and somebody is

pulling in and somebody keeps walking in front of them, you file a motion. I’m telling you right now, the court enforces its orders. Somebody will be held in contempt. Somebody will be paying a big fine.”

The injunction also prohibits any burning within 250 feet of the facilities’ entrances or warehouses. This is designed to make picketing at night as uncomfortable as possible since workers normally burn wood in 55-gallon barrels to provide heat and light.

The injunction is a major escalation of the attack on striking workers. There is a long history of companies hiring private security to stage provocations against striking workers and then video them to provide “evidence” for massive fines, frameups and arrests.

One striking worker responded on Reddit, saying the judge was a “money man” for the company and that “many of things said in the suit are flat out lies.” Heaven Hill, he said, is “a s**thole place to work and this has completely severed any respect we had for each other.” The worker added, “The day to day job isn’t honestly that bad, it’s the fact that they schedule us for 40–50 days in a row sometimes mandatory, and if you call in more than one time a month during those 50 day mandatory streaks you get written up and let go.”

Heaven Hill has refused to budge of its demands to eliminate a cap on health insurance premium increases, which will slice deeply into take-home pay. The company also wants major changes to work schedules including forced overtime and a “non-traditional” workweek, which would introduce Saturday and Sunday work.

While demanding these concessions, Heaven Hill raked in \$500 million in the last quarter. Industry analysts say bourbon sales have seen a “huge growth” during the pandemic and “the main beneficiaries of this trend have been larger distillers like Heaven Hill,”

according to vincepair.com. “Even brands that were flat before are seeing growth in this environment,” said Heaven Hill’s Susan Wahl, vice president of American Whiskeys.

Like other sections of workers, Heaven Hill workers are already livid over longer working hours and are steadfastly opposing the demand for weekend work. “The schedule is going to take time away from us and our kids and our families,” one worker told local media. “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.” Another worker said, “Basically, it’s going to end up making us work seven days a week with no overtime.”

There is popular support for the striking workers in Bardstown, a town of 13,500 people about 40 miles southeast of Louisville. Several restaurants and small businesses have stopped serving the company’s products. “It’s not just about the business, it’s not just about the money, it’s about doing what you believe in,” one local restaurant manager told the media. Distillery workers were part of her “Bardstown family.”

The strike, however, is in great danger due to the isolation of the struggle by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and other unions, including the United Auto Workers, which has thousands of members at Ford’s two giant Louisville assembly plants. To fight the strikebreaking injunction, Heaven Hill workers should form a rank-and-file strike committee to expand the strike to Jim Beam and other distilleries and to mobilize broader sections of the working class to win their demands. At the same time, Ford workers should send delegations to aid the Kentucky distillery workers.

We urge striking workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* for more information about building rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact