

UFCW union refuses to expand strike as Heaven Hill distillery moves to bring in scabs

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Nearly a month into the strike by 400 bourbon distillery workers in Bardstown, Kentucky, Heaven Hill management is moving to permanently replace strikers with scab labor.

Heaven Hill workers walked off the job on September 11 after rejecting by 95 percent a proposed five-year contract containing an increased workweek and increased out-of-pocket health care costs. The Heaven Hill strike is part of a growing rebellion which includes several major strikes in the United States, including over 10,000 workers at farm and construction equipment manufacturer John Deere, Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, nurses in three states and over 1,400 Kellogg's cereal workers.

After the walkout, in an effort to force them into submission, the company moved swiftly to terminate workers' health care benefits—a vindictive maneuver under normal circumstances, but one that is essentially homicidal under conditions of a global pandemic. Kentucky has seen almost 730,000 total cases and over 9,000 deaths.

In addition to cutting off workers' health care, the company has also taken legal action, filing for an injunction against the strike, limiting their ability to conduct a struggle and opening them up to punitive fines and possible imprisonment. Strikers have been barred from blocking entrances, "tailing" any trucks entering or exiting the distillery and "[harassing] employees at affiliated companies." The injunction also allows the company to send scabs across the picket line, which the company recently announced it plans to do.

"As Heaven Hill and UFCW 23D have reached an impasse in contract negotiations, Heaven Hill will begin the process of hiring permanent replacement workers, and welcomes Heaven Hill union team

members who wish to apply," the company said in a statement.

Matt Aubrey, the president of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 23D, issued a statement in response disputing that talks have reached an impasse. "The reality is that Heaven Hill negotiations are not at an impasse. UFCW 23D and Heaven Hill workers are ready and willing to meet with the company to continue talks so that we can reach a fair contract."

The actions of the company have only tempered workers' determination to fight. But workers are confronting not just the corporations, but the union as well, which is essentially allowing the company to replace workers without any serious resistance. It is doing nothing to mobilize its 25,000 members in the state of Kentucky, or other unionized workers, such as roughly 13,000 Ford workers in nearby Louisville. Instead, the UFCW has resorted to pathetic moral appeals, begging the company to return to the bargaining table. The company, for its part, is adamant about imposing its demands, calling the contract workers overwhelmingly rejected its "last, best and final offer."

The spinelessness of the UFCW at Heaven Hill is similar to the response of the Massachusetts Nurses Association in the strike by nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, who have allowed management to hire hundreds of replacements for months.

The reality is that there is plenty of money to meet workers' demands. Heaven Hill is one of the largest distilleries in the country, with revenues estimated to be over \$500 million. The company invested \$19 million in a tourist center, which opened earlier this year. Meanwhile, the bourbon industry itself has experienced significant growth despite the pandemic, with sales of

bourbon, Tennessee whiskey and rye whiskey reaching \$4.3 billion in 2020, an increase of \$327 million over the previous year.

Moreover, there is immense support for the strike at Heaven Hill, not just in the Bardstown community, but across the country. But the strike is at a crossroads. Left in the hands of the UFCW, the powerful position occupied by the Heaven Hill workers will be squandered, and the workers led to defeat.

The way forward requires that workers take matters into their own hands, by forming a new alternative leadership. This means the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee, democratically elected and controlled by workers themselves, to appeal for the broadest possible support at distilleries across the state, as well as autoworkers, teachers, nurses and other sections of the working class who are also moving into struggle.



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