

After five weeks on strike, UFCW calls snap contract vote for Heaven Hill distillery workers

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After Kentucky Heaven Hill distillery workers walked picket lines day and night for five weeks, they have been given little more than 24 hours to make a decision on a union-backed tentative agreement (TA).

The first and most important step is for workers to demand adequate time to study this new agreement. That would require at least one solid week of meetings to read and understand what the United Food and Commercial Workers 23D “negotiating committee” has pledged workers to endure over the next five years.

How can anyone forget what they brought the first time? According to some reports the TA is little more than the first agreement with a few “clarifications” from the company.

Neither union nor company officials will say what is in the agreement, according to a report early yesterday afternoon by the *Louisville Courier Journal* and one television station.

A statement from Heaven Hill, located in Bardstown, Kentucky, said the UFCW 23D negotiating committee provided their “full recommendation” for the new agreement, WHAS11 News reported.

“The agreement continues Heaven Hill’s long-standing commitment to its team members with industry-leading health care, wage growth and increased schedule flexibility,” the statement says.

Matt Aubrey, president of UFCW 23D, said Friday the union has “reached a fully recommended tentative agreement with Heaven Hill on a five-year contract,” the *Courier Journal* reported.

“With the strong support of the Bardstown community, these hardworking men and women have been standing together for more than a month to protect these good Kentucky jobs that their families have

counted on for generations,” a fawning Aubrey said. “Heaven Hill workers will make their voices heard tomorrow when they vote on this tentative agreement.”

Heaven Hill spokeswoman Lauren Cherry also said in a statement Friday that the contract ‘continues Heaven Hill’s long-standing commitment to its team members with industry-leading health care, wage growth and increased schedule flexibility.’

But what’s the rest of the story? What’s in the TA?

“It’s unclear what the contract entails,” the *Courier Journal* reported. “When *The Courier Journal* requested a copy, Cherry said: ‘I don’t have anything more to share at this time, but will follow up when I do.’ A union spokesman did not immediately reply to an emailed request for a copy of the contract.”

More than 400-plus workers at one of the richest and largest Bourbon whiskey distilleries in the world went on strike September 10 after rejecting the first proposed five-year agreement by more than 96 percent.

That was rejected in great part because Heaven Hill (\$500 million in revenues for 2020) wanted to require new workers to abandon “traditional” workweeks of Monday-Friday for five-day weeks that would eliminate traditional weekends. Heaven Hill workers—correctly—put no faith in the company’s later pledge not to demand non-standard workweeks of veteran workers.

As the old saying goes: “Give them an inch and they will take a mile.”

Workers also faced a contract deal that eliminated a cap on health insurance premium increases, made cuts to overtime pay and major changes to work schedules that could mean weekends or forced overtime.

When members of Local 23D faced hostile company-

written court injunctions, the union dragged its feet. It did nothing to expand the strike.

When they lost health care benefits for themselves and their families the union went hat-in-hand to the company to ask for goodwill ... and did not reach out to workers in other distilleries for common action. They made no attempt to link the fight of Heaven Hill workers with workers already in struggle around the US and world.

When Heaven Hill workers saw their jobs being given away when the company hired “full time replacement workers,” i.e., scabs, the union made no effort to mobilize opposition, merely complaining of “unfair labor practices.” As though any other behavior could be expected on the part of management of a multimillion-dollar corporation.

“The UFCW has resorted to pathetic moral appeals, begging the company to return to the bargaining table,” the WSWS declared at the time. “The company, for its part, is adamant about imposing its demands” and its “last, best and final offer.”

The Heaven Hill workers are not alone. A wave of strikes is sweeping across the United States and the world. Separated and isolated, each strike can be picked off and defeated. United, workers create a powerful force.

The *World Socialist Web Site* strongly advises workers to reject any attempt to blackmail them into a rushed vote. There should be no vote until all workers have had the chance to review, critique and debate the proposed contract. To win the strike and obtain a decent contract, workers must take matters into their own hands through the building of a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the UFCW. The committee should demand the rejection of any contract that does not meet workers’ basic demands and fight to spread the strike by linking up with other workers coming into struggle such as striking John Deere workers and Dana auto parts workers.



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