

Striking Kellogg workers describe the issues in their fight

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In the third week on strike, 1,400 Kellogg's cereal workers in the US are continuing their fight against the hated two-tier wage system and the inhuman 16-hour mandated work schedule. Kellogg workers have worked through the pandemic. Classified as "essential workers," they have risked their health for private profit.

Now in their third week on strike, Kellogg workers at four facilities in the US are demanding wage increases that keep up with inflation, an end to brutal work schedules that keep them on the job for weeks at a time, and an end to the hated two-tier wage structure.

Striking workers at the Kellogg facilities in Battle Creek, Michigan spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* describing the conditions they face.

A legacy worker spoke on the impact of the pandemic. "A quarter of the workers here had COVID. We got pieces of paper being told to carry it in case the police pull you over. It said, 'essential worker.' Now we're nothing again! You swallow your \$11.6 million and we're garbage again. We only had two \$500 bonus checks before taxes."

Steven Cahillane, CEO of Kellogg's made \$11.6 million in total compensation in 2020, while workers are forced to work seven days a week. The worker continued, "the new CEO makes 11.6 million, doubling his money, while we slaved through the pandemic. They need to be humbled. These CEOs are never in here."

"[The current contract] allows for mandatory seven days a week, but they could force you 365 days if they wanted. We're not a 40-hour week [company] we work seven days mandatory." Workers referenced a coworker who calculated the total hours in the plant equaling eight hours a day for 365 days a year. "It's not all peaches and cream like they show on TV."

"We cover for each other if someone needs to take off. Only way to get a day off is to cover two shifts." Workers described how the company mandates workers to come in

even when they have a scheduled day off. They are also held captive by the company at the end of the shift. "At the end of the shift, supervisors with 10 minutes left, would try to force overtime. Sometimes they would shut the badge off at the gate to stop us from leaving.

"They tried to tell us that after 16 hours they will send a cab for us. Well unfortunately Battle Creek doesn't have cabs. There are people in here that live 20-30 minutes away, I'm amazed there haven't been accidents." Despite the rule against more than one mandate, workers are forced to work more than one 16-hour shift a week. "You have a choice to not go on mandatory overtime. If you keep trying to take off, you keep racking up points against yourself."

Workers described the dysfunction inside the plant. "Equipment is older than I am. We have to steal parts from other areas. Management will tell us they have to save in the budget so they can get their bonuses. So, we have to find our own tools and parts when packing sizes change. For the same reason they don't update the [computer] systems. Sometimes a load will be lost with no record of where it is. Safety is also a big thing; fingers can get pinched on the packing line on machinery. After overtime hours you feel like a zombie. They just want a body."

A fellow picket spoke on the issues raised in the contract. "Nothing was talked about in the contract. I'm ready to get it over with, [but] not going to settle for chump change. We're out here fighting for a reason." Workers opposed the tier wage scales, left open by the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union (BCTGM). "Legacy isn't losing anything; we're fighting for younger workers. Not easy when you have kids at home. In the interview they told us we work 56 hours a week. Then they tell the world we volunteer."

The Battle Creek plant had over 4,000 workers. After

decades of deindustrialization, the plants have fewer than 320 workers. As at other manufacturing plants, contracted workers have been used to eliminate long-term benefits and health care for full-time workers.

There have been cycles of CEOs over the decades, who “suck profits and leave.” A second-generation worker spoke about the changes of the conditions of life for workers. “My dad never said anything about money, always about benefits and health care. You can always live within your means but now with no benefits or pension, a medical bill can wipe people out.”

Workers spoke on the five-year contract. “One thing that irks me is the contract is five years. I’m tier one, tier two is not getting paid like us. It takes them seven years to get where we are. That’s unfair: seven years for top pay when the contract is only five. They work next to us.”

The BCTGM not only allowed tier wages from previous contracts to continue but allowed Kellogg’s to bring in scab labor. Working to sabotage the struggle at Kellogg’s, the BCTGM local president in Omaha reported that 100 ironworkers, construction workers and electricians who are members of the Building and Construction Trades Council (BCTC) would begin working inside the Kellogg plant. This is not isolated to Omaha; workers at Battle Creek reported they saw buses full of workers sent to local hotels.

“Kellogg’s bought out the hotel. I’ve seen more buses at the Red Roof Inn. Someone tried to get hotel rooms but they said there’s no vacancies. They pulled people from everywhere and brought them to Battle Creek.”

This action follows the complicity of the union and the company in attacking workers’ living standards. For years there have been job cuts. This past September, Kellogg announced the cutting of 212 jobs, the majority of which were factory workers. Workers expressed opposition to this and previous actions by the union. “On Labor Day for the last four years they said they were cutting over 200 jobs,” a legacy worker stated. “If they have money to bus in workers from outside and put them in a hotel, then they can give it to us workers.

“In the last contract the International BCTGM said this is the ‘best thing you’re going to get.’ We rushed him out of the room. We all knew he was getting a deal with Kellogg, and we rejected it.” Last month the BCTGM rammed through a sellout contract against 1,000 striking Nabisco workers. While hailed by the Democratic Party appendages, the details of the contract were not released. Details later emerged showing a miserable wage increase of \$0.60 an hour per year, far below the inflation rate. The

deal included a \$5,000 sign-on bonus to entice workers into swallowing this poison pill.

Production workers were encouraged by the international upsurge of strikes taking place. One spoke about the strike by 150,000 metalworkers in South Africa. “I read that in here! Finally, people are fed up. You have leverage now; companies are bringing up people because they can’t find workers. It makes you mad, it feels like you own that stuff even though it’s Kellogg’s property; we’re in there all the time.”

A legacy worker supported the upsurge of workers’ struggles: “About time American workers are heard. We make the products, but we lose out on our family time. I couldn’t tell you how many holidays I missed in my first six years here. I couldn’t spend it with my kids.” Speaking about the CEO she said, “without us you’re not going to get your bonus.”

Workers at Kellogg are in a powerful position. In a turning point in the class struggle, workers are overwhelmingly rejecting union-backed contracts by 90 percent or more. There is immense determination by workers to win back higher wages and standards of living not seen in decades.

Kellogg workers must recognize they are part of a global working class and must consciously link their struggle with that of workers across the US and internationally. Kellogg and other corporations have a global strategy, workers need their own international strategy. To do that they must build rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-management, nationalist BCTGM. Workers must raise a list of their own demands, based on their real needs, not what Kellogg and BCTGM say they can afford or will accept. Workers interested in learning more should contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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