

US Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh feigns support for Kellogg's strike in visit to picket line

Tim Rivers
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Marty Walsh, the US secretary of labor, was dispatched by the Biden White House on Wednesday to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he staged a brief photo-op on the picket lines with striking Kellogg's workers in which he feigned support for their struggle.

The Kellogg's plant in Lancaster is one of the company's four US cereal plants which 1,400 workers have struck nationwide. The walkout is only the second in the 45-year history of the Lancaster plant. Products made at the Lancaster plant include Corn Flakes, Frosted Flakes, Raisin Bran, Special K, Shredded Wheat, Frosted Shredded Wheat, Crispix, All Bran and Rice Krispies cereals.

The strike at Kellogg's is part of a growing strike movement by US workers, which also includes 10,000 workers at John Deere, demanding wage increases that exceed the rate of inflation and an end to unsafe working conditions and long working hours. As with workers in many other industries, workers at Kellogg's have been forced to work for weeks at a time without a single day off during the pandemic.

As Walsh spoke in Pennsylvania, several hundred workers joined a rally in support of the strikers at Festival Market Square in downtown Battle Creek, across the street from Kellogg Co. world headquarters. The demonstration was called by the local AFL-CIO.

"I stand here with you today, on behalf of myself and President Biden," Walsh said to the pickets and the assembled media during his 40-minute stop, "to let you know how much the president cares about the workers of America, people's rights to [join unions], people's rights to be able to ask for higher wages and better working conditions..."

The secretary continued, "I want you to know that we are watching. You do have support," Walsh said. "And I hope that ... the leadership of your union here, along with the company, get together soon, resolve this strike and get you back where you belong—on the inside of the fence, not the outside of this fence. Thank you for the opportunity to come here today and be with all of you today. It's an honor to be standing with you and walking the picket line."

Walsh acknowledged "it might be a little different for a

secretary of labor of the United States of America coming out and standing on a picket line. But if you have it in your blood, you have it in your blood."

The highly unusual, if not unprecedented, initiative of sending cabinet level officials to picket lines one after another—just a week earlier the US secretary of agriculture, Tom Vilsack, made an official visit to a John Deere workers' picket line—demonstrates a growing anxiety within the Biden administration over the surge of industrial action worldwide and the mounting anger over inequality and the criminal policies of allowing the coronavirus pandemic to spread that is driving it. The visits followed an online intervention by Biden himself earlier this year on behalf of the RWDSU union's efforts to win union recognition at an Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama.

Biden has repeatedly claimed that he intends to be the most "pro-union" president in American history. This means, in reality, that he is relying even more heavily than his predecessors on the union bureaucracy to smother the class struggle and enforce the type of exploitative conditions which American capitalism requires to maximize profits and keep the stock market going. A multimillionaire in his own right, Biden was vice president under Obama during his administration's bailout of the auto industry in 2009, under which wages for new hires were cut in half. In return for this and other concessions, the United Auto Workers was given billions of dollars in corporate stock.

This is the type of "pro-union" relationship which Biden is attempting to replicate as president. This has already been clearly demonstrated in his response to the supply chain crisis, brokering a deal with the unions to keep the Port of Los Angeles running 24/7, and his threats earlier this week to deploy the national guard to ease port congestion.

Walsh exemplifies the corrupt corporatist relations between the unions, the corporations and the capitalist state which Biden is seeking to develop. Before rising to national prominence, Walsh had a profitable career within the trade union bureaucracy while simultaneously advancing his career within the Democratic Party at the state level.

He joined the Laborers' Union Local 223 in the late 1980s where he would serve as the union's president until he was elected mayor of Boston in 2013. Walsh was earlier elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1997 to 2014, on which he served simultaneously with his position in the union, drawing salaries from both. In 2011, he was named head of the Boston Building Trades, a position that came with a \$175,000 annual salary, only resigning so that he could run for mayor in 2013.

As mayor, Walsh spearheaded the drive to reopen Boston schools for in-person instruction against the opposition of teachers, with the collaboration of the Boston Teachers Union.

The Biden administration wants to have its cake and eat it too. Claiming to be the most pro-union US administration ever, it sends cabinet secretaries to shmooze striking workers while at the same time slashing unemployment benefits to force workers into factories at the point of starvation. State and municipal Democrats join their Republican colleagues in threatening legal action against parents who resist placing their children in schools contaminated with COVID-19.

The administration expresses the gathering fear among sections of big business that the Kellogg's workers' union, the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' (BCTGM) International Union, and the unions more broadly, are losing control of the class struggle of workers. The structure that has held for four decades since the AFL-CIO stabbed PATCO in the back to impose one concessions contract after another is finally breaking down.

Quite the contrary, the unions have come forward as the first line of defense of corporate interests of the profit interests of big business. Just in the last month the IATSE intervened against an overwhelming strike vote by 60,000 film and television technicians to prevent them from going on strike; the hospital workers union stepped in to prevent Kaiser Permanente hospital workers from taking strike action in support of their demands for better pay and benefits, safety and staffing levels to save lives of both health care workers and patients alike in the face of surging infections of COVID-19; and the UAW and USWA used threats and intimidation to contain the gathering anger among auto parts workers from erupting in solidarity action with their fellow auto workers at John Deere who are being isolated and starved on the picket line in their third week on strike.

The BCTGM union has attempted to divert workers' anger over hours and wages at Kellogg's and other food companies into a right-wing racist campaign attacking Kellogg's workers in Mexico, who also are brutally exploited, for supposedly taking American jobs. In one particularly foul comment to Yahoo Finance, BCTGM Local 3G President Trevor Bidelman claimed, "You're told quite rightly not to drink the water in Mexico. So I don't know why you would want to eat the food that was made from that water."

In addition to sabotaging the unity of workers in the United

States and Mexico, it has also sought to break the unity of workers at Kellogg's with other companies. It called off a strike at Nabisco last month shortly before the start of the Kellogg's strike, without any of the issues in that strike having been resolved. Workers at Nabisco report they are still working 70 to 80 hours a week, just as they were before the strike.

Walsh's stop in Lancaster came the day after Kellogg's BCTGM union agreed to go back to the bargaining table for the first time since the strike began. Talks are set for Tuesday and Wednesday of next week.

Kerry Williams, president of the union's Local 374, which represents the Lancaster workers, said the biggest obstacle to a new contract remains the fate of Kellogg's two-tier wages and benefits. Under the system, employees hired after 2015 get less pay and lower benefits than those hired before 2015. Williams claimed hypocritically that the union is firmly against any concessions, when it has already agreed to two-tier wages and other concessions in previous contracts.

While the union attempts to divide workers and direct their attention to fruitless appeals to the government, Kellogg's workers' real allies are their brothers and sisters in Kellogg's plants and in other food processing facilities around the world. "There's 33,000 Kellogg employees internationally, roughly. Absolutely, the strike should be expanded," one lifelong Battle Creek resident and worker with 13 years seniority told the WSWS.

To carry the struggle forward against the opposition of the company, the government and the union, workers require new independent organizations and leadership. This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party are helping to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees as a new alternative leadership, independent of the union bureaucrats, which seeks to unite the struggles of workers across the world.



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