

Strike at Kellogg's in danger as it enters sixth week

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The strike of 1,400 workers against multinational cereal giant Kellogg's is continuing into its sixth week. The workers—members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union (BCTGM)—walked out on October 5 over the hated two-tier wage system, forced overtime, and poor working conditions, part of a growing strike wave across the US which also includes the strike at farm equipment manufacturer John Deere as well as an impending strike at hospital chain Kaiser Permanente on the west coast.

There is enormous support within the working class for the strike. Workers in areas surrounding the plants, located in Battle Creek, Michigan, Omaha, Nebraska, Nashville, Tennessee and Lancaster, Pennsylvania have brought food and other items for the strikers.

But the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union (BCTGM) is isolating workers on the picket line, starving workers out on \$105 in strike pay per week and doing nothing to mobilize workers across the country or at Kellogg's plants internationally. Indeed, the Building and Construction Trades Council (BCTC) is instructing 100 ironworkers, construction workers, and electricians to cross the picket line at the Omaha plant, a fact which the BCTGM blandly acknowledged in a statement. This information has been confined to the business press and not announced on websites or Facebook pages of either union.

Kellogg's has already recruited and hired replacement workers, busing them into the plants. One worker has been struck by such a bus at the Omaha facility, expressing the determination of the company to keep production going, come what may. On Thursday, the company filed suit there to prevent workers from “interfering” with scab buses as they enter the plant.

The company is also bringing cereal into the United States produced by its global plants to make up for any shortfall in production at the US plants being run by management with scab labor. Earlier this month CEO Steve Cahillane told Bloomberg News, “We have plants in Mexico, Canada, the U.K. — Manchester is a very big cereal plant — and even as far away as Australia.”

Indeed, Kellogg's is a transnational giant with operations in every continent except Antarctica. Its four US cereal plants are less than 20 percent of its global operations, with 21 other plants scattered across the globe.

While the company's international strikebreaking operation no doubt runs up against logistical difficulties with clogged parts and a global supply chain breakdown, this nonetheless points to the need for workers to adopt an international strategy of their own to fight the company. If the struggle is isolated only to the four locations in the US, without mobilizing support from workers across the world, the strike can be isolated and defeated.

But rather than appeal to their international co-workers, who would respond with enthusiasm to hear that their American counterparts are on strike, the BCTGM officials are promoting reactionary American nationalism, dividing workers who happen to live in the United States from their counterparts in other countries. It is engaged in an incessant media campaign denouncing production by Kellogg's and other food giants in Mexico in particular. Signs on the picket line implore the company to “stop sending jobs to Mexico.”

Rather than working for the unity of all workers exploited by the company, the BCTGM seeks to poison relations between those who labor on the two sides of the border. And while the union's nationalism would

be no better if it referred to other countries from which Kellogg's is now importing cereal, the singling out of Mexican plants has undeniable racist undertones. This came out into the open when BCTGM Local 3G President Trevor Bidelman told Yahoo Finance, "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."

Kellogg's retains the confidence of Wall Street. Its share price has weathered the strike nearly without disturbance, up 1.1 percent since October 5. While lower than competitor General Mills (up 2.2 percent), it is far higher than Post Holdings (down 4.4 percent), a cross-town rival whose corporate headquarters are also located in Battle Creek. On a conference call on November 4 with analysts from the giant investment banks, Cahillane said that the company's "organic net sales growth" would be 2-3 percent for 2021 and profits would grow by about 1 percent. (The company made \$1.25 billion on sales of \$13.8 billion in 2020).

The CEO said that the company was prepared to defend its profits, notwithstanding inflation. "Our first line of defense is always productivity. And as we plan out 2022, we'll plan for the same levels of productivity or greater..." he said. In other words, work will be sped up when the strike is finished. When one analyst asked him whether the strike demonstrated that it would be wise "to just kind of have a super cycle in the near term just to automate as much as possible," Cahillane answered in language that would be well understood by his audience. "[I]t's a really interesting question that you raised strategically," he said, adding that, "the future of work is clearly going to change, and our capital plans over the next couple of years will reflect that." The analysts were undoubtedly pleased by the conduct of the company during the strike, its refusal to make concessions to the workers, and its plans to step up exploitation in 2022.

These developments confirm the warning that has been made by the *World Socialist Web Site*: in the hands of the union officials, the strike of the Kellogg's workers will be put in a straitjacket.

In its first article on the strike, the WSWs warned, "Under conditions of a surge forward by the working class, the ruling class is compelled to rely even more heavily on the trade unions to limit and isolate strikes and impose concessionary contracts. Throughout the

year, the unions have sought to impose one contract after another with wage increases below the rate of inflation, while leaving the regime of virtually limitless overtime intact. Moreover, they have worked hand in glove with management to keep workers on the job even amidst continuous outbreaks of COVID-19, covering up infections inside workplace where they occur."

The developments in the Kellogg's strike recall the outcome of the strike at Nabisco, where workers are also part of the BCTGM. The BCTGM shut down the strike in late September shortly before the Kellogg's strike began, ramming through a sellout deal with wage increases of between 2-2.5 percent per year over four years, which amounts to a massive cut in real wages, creating a real pay cut. Workers were given no time to read the contract before the vote. Workers reported that after returning to work they were resuming the same brutal regime of 80-hour work weeks which they had been subjected to before the strike and which they were fighting to end.

The unfolding of the strike at Kellogg's underscores the need for the creation of a rank-and-file committee of workers that will take the control of the struggle, repudiate previous concessions like the two-tier wage system, and connect with workers across the food-processing industry, both in the US and internationally.



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