

Kellogg's threatens to permanently replace striking workers

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In a major escalation of its attack against striking workers, US-based food giant Kellogg's announced Wednesday that it would begin hiring permanent replacements for the 1,400 workers who have been on strike since October 5 at the company's cereal plants in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Nebraska and Tennessee.

In a terse press release, the company said it "had no choice but to best serve the short- and long-term interests of our customers and consumers by moving to the next phase of our contingency plans.

"We will continue to run our plants effectively with hourly and salaried employees, third-party resources, and temporary replacements, and now where appropriate, hire permanent replacements."

The company has been using temporary replacement workers nearly since the beginning of the strike, and has been aggressively moving them through picket lines, resulting in several strikers being hit by vehicles outside the Omaha, Nebraska plant last month. Management is also seeking a court injunction to allow freer movement of the scabs and is working with the strikebreaking firm AFIMAC Global.

The company says negotiations with the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union (BCTGM) broke down Monday and are not slated to restart until December 6. While management claims to have offered a plan to "graduate" workers with four or more years to higher pay scales, BCTGM refused to sign, aware that they could not get such a deal ratified by the rank and file.

Workers are looking to overturn the two-tier wage and benefit system previously accepted by the BCTGM, which includes numerous pay scales for senior "legacy" workers and 30 percent of the workforce stuck in a "transitional level" with lower pay and benefits. On the picket lines in Battle Creek,

Michigan and elsewhere, workers are carrying signs saying, "Our future is not for sale," expressing their determination to fight for equal pay, pensions and retiree benefits for the next generation of workers.

In 2013, the company locked out 200 workers at its Memphis, Tennessee plant for nine months after they resisted company demands to expand lower-paid casual workers. The plant was later put under the BCTGM master agreement, which included the two-tier system.

Workers who have risked their lives during the pandemic are also fighting excessive overtime, including 16-hour shifts and seven-day work schedules that have robbed them of rest and family time. Ironically, Kellogg's introduced a six-hour day for many of its workers in 1930 to create jobs for laid-off workers during the Depression and counter efforts by militant workers to unionize its plants.

The Battle Creek-based company and maker of Corn Flakes, Frosted Flakes, Rice Krispies, Special K, Pringles, Pop-Tarts and Nutri-Grain brand cereals and snack foods had global sales of \$13.7 billion and is expected to earn more because of the increased consumption of its products during the pandemic. It has a global workforce of 31,000 and operates manufacturing facilities in 18 countries.

The BCTGM and the national AFL-CIO labor federation, however, have let the 1,400 striking workers fight the global giant alone. In other struggles, such as the eight- and nine-month-long strikes by Warrior Met Coal miners and St. Vincent hospital nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts, the unions have also isolated strikes, leaving workers vulnerable to strikebreaking and company and state violence.

The Kellogg's workers started their strike last month, as workers were engaging in what was developing into the largest strike wave in generations. The AFL-CIO

and its affiliated unions responded by shutting down the Deere strike, blocking strikes by 3,500 Dana auto parts workers and 100,000 film and TV production workers and Kaiser Permanente nurses and other healthcare workers. In all of these battles, the unions worked to defuse the social anger that has been mounting within the working class over pay and conditions since the beginning of the COVID pandemic.

The BCTGM web site says nothing about this latest assault by Kellogg's. Its last press release was three weeks ago and was a mere 159 words long. Its online magazine tries to cover the impotence of the union officials by presenting a very distorted view of the strike wave in October, with the BCTGM president, Anthony Shelton, writing, "Kellogg workers, like their brothers and sisters at Frito-Lay and Nabisco, are saying, 'Enough is enough'. Workers are rising. We are refusing to settle for less. And we are using every tool at our disposal to win what is fair."

Left unsaid is that fact that Shelton's colleagues in the AFL-CIO worked hand-in-hand with the employers to bring this strike wave under control. Also passed over in silence is the fate of the workers at Frito-Lay and Nabisco (also represented by the BCTGM) who did not realize any of their demands to dismantle two-tier pay scales, recover decades of real wage losses and put an end to ten- and twelve-hour days.

The Kellogg's strike is at a critical crossroads. Autoworkers, health care workers and others cannot allow the company to carry out a PATCO-style strikebreaking operation, which would set a precedent to be used against all workers. But the struggle cannot be left in the hands of the BCTGM and other corporatist unions.

Kellogg's workers should form a rank-and-file strike committee to advance their own demands, including the immediate abolition of the two-tier wage and benefit system, substantial wage increases to make up for years of lost wages, the restoration of cost-of-living (COLA) payments to fight the ravages of inflation, and the restoration of the eight-hour day. This committee should fight to expand the strike by appealing to all workers in the US, along with Kellogg's workers in Canada, Mexico and across its global empire for joint action to defeat the company's strikebreaking threats and win their demands.



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