Tentative agreement announced in Kellogg's strike

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On Wednesday evening, Kellogg's and the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' (BCTGM) union announced a tentative agreement to end the strike by 1,400 workers at the company's four US cereal plants. Voting has been set for Sunday, December 5, and the union announced the strike will continue until the deal is ratified.

Workers walked out two months ago on October 5, angered by a merciless system of forced overtime, the persistence of a two-tier wage system and the company's demand to expand it beyond its previous limit of 30 percent of the workforce. Kellogg's workers are also fighting decades of job cuts, unsafe conditions and increasingly obsolescent machinery that points to systematic underinvestment in productive capital. Workers on the picket lines have pointed to the billions in company profits accrued over the previous agreement and the $11.6 million annual compensation for CEO Steve Cahillane.

Last week the company walked out of negotiations the day they resumed and threatened to permanently replace striking workers. For the first time this week, federal mediators were mentioned in news reports as being part of the negotiations, undoubtedly reflecting the desire of the Biden administration to wind down the strike wave, which has lasted much of the fall.

Few details of the agreement have been made public save that workers at the higher level of pay in the tiered system would receive pay increases of 3 percent—about half the current rate of inflation, marking a significant cut in real compensation—and "cost-of-living increases" in the remaining years of the proposed five-year deal. So-called "transitionary" workers (i.e., those in the lower pay tier) with at least four years' experience are reported to be promoted to the top tier while those with less seniority are to be moved to the first tier at a time yet unspecified in the contract.

Among the calculations of the company and the union is that the low pay and forced overtime will create sufficient turnover in the ranks of new employees that a sizeable fraction will not make the cutoff before the end of the agreement. Workers have reported that the 30 percent cap has been removed.

News reports have not commented on the high level of mandatory overtime that regularly forces Kellogg's workers to labor for 12- and even 16-hour shifts. Nor have there been reports on the lack of adequate protections against the spread of COVID-19, which has already affected significant numbers of Kellogg's workers, even before the emergence of the new Omicron variant.

NPR reported, "There wouldn't be any changes to employees' current health care plans, but the agreement would add new dental and vision benefits." Unspecified, however, is whether co-pays, deductibles and other rules to force workers to pay more for their own care would be changed. Nor are there any details about the actual value of the dental and vision benefits, which are far less costly to employers than health care, and generally bring their own separate deductibles and co-pays.

The union is clearly apprehensive about trying to sell the deal to the membership. The president of the BCTGM local in Pennsylvania, Kerry Williams, told the media, "It's not what we were initially trying to get, but at the end of the day, we will have a contract decided by the membership." He acknowledged that retiring workers hired after 2015 will not be provided medical benefits. This is huge concession that will shorten the life expectancy of workers who have produced a lifetime of profits for the company.

Even the president of the national union, Anthony

Shelton, refrained from calling on members to vote for the agreement in his press release. This, of course, has not stopped Shelton—who made $288,502 in 2020 and is ensured retiree health benefits—from instructing his subordinates to bring this sellout agreement to a vote.

Throughout the strike, the BCTGM has sought to keep the struggle at Kellogg's from spilling over into a broader movement of the working class. It has made no attempt to mobilize workers throughout the food industry in a common struggle for an eight-hour day, an end to two-tier pay systems, and the guarantee of health care and other benefits to all workers. Rather than uniting with cereal manufacturing workers at other Kellogg's facilities around the globe—the $21 billion company has operations in 18 countries—the union promoted economic nationalism and waged a campaign calling on the company to "stop sending jobs to Mexico" and urging consumers not to eat cereal made there in company plants. In fact, the company imported food from as far away as its Australian plants.

At the same time, the national AFL-CIO has been working hand in hand with the Biden administration to block new strikes—at the Hollywood studios and Kaiser Permanente—while shutting down continuing ones at John Deere and other locations. The main concern of the business executives that run these organizations, which are "unions" in name only, is preventing any challenge to the low-wage regime that has fueled the decadeslong boom in corporate profits and the stock market.

Following its betrayal of the Nabisco and Frito-Lay strikes over similar issues, the BCTGM left the Kellogg's workers isolated and kept them on starvation rations of $105 in strike pay. This left them vulnerable to the company's strikebreaking operations. Throughout the strike Kellogg's used the services of the notorious strikebreaking firm AFIMAC Global to recruit replacement workers, get them through picket lines—injuring workers in the process—and safeguard the company's ability to ship its product.

Kellogg's workers are openly hostile to the agreement and with good reason. "We all need to vote NO!" wrote one on Facebook. Another explained, "No cap on transitionals is a death sentence. A percent of a shrinking number means less and less full-time employees. No cap on transitionals will result in a replaced workforce with no full health care, no COLA, and no pension. It's exactly why we went on strike in the first place. It's exactly why I will stay on strike. We will not cut the throats of future employees." A third worker commented, "I agree 100% with you."

Kellogg's workers should organize now to defeat the sellout agreement and take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the BCTGM. This means following the example of workers at John Deere, Dana and other corporations by joining and building the growing network of rank-and-file committees, which give workers a voice and a leadership to fight. Only by doing so and linking this struggle with the class battles around the US and internationally can the Kellogg's workers defend their jobs and improve their conditions.

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