

Tentative agreement announced in Kellogg's strike

The lessons of the International Committee's 1995 global struggle to defend jobs at Kellogg's

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The tentative agreement between Kellogg's and the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco, and Grain Miller's (BCTGM) union announced Wednesday does not resolve a single serious issue that prompted the October 5 walkout by 1,400 cereal production workers at the company's four US facilities.

The company is seeking to expand its use of lower-paid workers, euphemistically referred to as "transition" employees, to lower costs, boost profits and augment the bonus pool for executives. For its part, the BCTGM has opposed any effort to mobilize support from workers across the food producing industry in the US, let alone internationally, a step which would be required in any serious fight with a multibillion-dollar company that has operations in 18 countries and a global workforce of 31,000.

The present struggle raises the significance of an initiative, practically unique in the history of industrial conflicts, that was carried out more than 25 years ago by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to defend jobs at Kellogg's from mass firings and protect workers' benefits and conditions. The Socialist Equality Parties in different parts of the world, which produce the World Socialist Web Site, collectively constitute the ICFI. A historical note is in order: at the time of this initiative, the constituent organizations of the ICFI were called "leagues" and later transformed themselves into parties (see: "The Workers League and the Founding of the Socialist Equality Party").

The ICFI's defense of jobs at Kellogg's was prompted by the mass firing of 150 maintenance workers, cleaners, and night watchmen at the company's plant in Botany, an industrial suburb of Sydney, Australia on the night of July 6, 1995. As related in the *International Workers Bulletin*, the printed newspaper of the Workers League, between the hours of 11 p.m. and midnight and "without any advance notice, couriers hired by the company descended on the homes of the workers and delivered termination letters, informing them that they were laid off as of 7 a.m. the following morning. Over 100 security guards entered the plant and escorted maintenance and cleaning workers who were completing their shifts to their lockers [i.e., they were not at home when the couriers were out]. The mass firings were carried out while the factory's 300 production workers were on annual leave."

The IWB went on to report, "The layoffs took place only days after the unions signed a contract with Kellogg's which included a new clause sanctioning the use of contract labor. The unions called no mass meetings, and no union officials were present on the morning of Friday, July 7 when the fired maintenance workers gathered outside the plant."

The Socialist Labor League in Australia (the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the country) took the initiative to fight against the mass

firing. Warwick Dove, a member of the SLL and one of the 150 workers fired, "called a mass meeting of the fired workers on Tuesday July 11. He urged them to set up a picket at the plant to rally the support of the production workers and mobilize other plants in the area against the firings. He called for the workers to elect a rank-and-file committee independent of the union bureaucrats. Union officials intervened to oppose any industrial action. They threatened the workers, saying the union would not defend them if they set up a picket line."

The treachery of the union continued in the immediate aftermath. "On Sunday, July 16 and Monday, July 17, when the production workers returned to the plant, SLL members and supporters and a number of the fired maintenance workers circulated an open letter from Dove, calling on the production workers to take a stand with their fellow workers and proposing the holding of a mass meeting to organize united action. To counter widespread support for the open letter, union officials told production workers Kellogg's would close the factory if they took any action. In the face of the union's backstabbing, the majority of the fired maintenance workers voted to accept a union-company deal for severance payments and voluntary retirements."

The firing of the workers in Australia was only one prong of an offensive by the company against its global workforce. The following month, the company trained its sights on its US workers. The IWB explained, "On August 22, Kellogg's officials told a mass meeting at its headquarters factory in Battle Creek, Michigan that they intended to eliminate 800 of the 1,700 jobs in Battle Creek and 275 of the 600 jobs at the company's Memphis, Tennessee factory. Earlier in the month Kellogg's said it would close its cereal factory in San Leandro, California, eliminating 325 jobs."

In its global war against its workers, Kellogg's depended upon the active collaboration of the unions that were nominally representing the workers. The IWB argued, "In Battle Creek and Sydney, the trade unions have collaborated with Kellogg's management to destroy jobs and victimize workers. At both plants the workers are facing two enemies: the corporate bosses themselves and their servants in the union hierarchy, who oppose any struggle against the layoffs and firings."

Not only had the union refused to take action to defend workers' jobs, but it had also intervened to threaten those workers still employed from taking any action in solidarity with the victimized workers, ensuring the company's ability to ram through the job cuts and the closure of the San Leandro plant.

Dove, the SLL, and the International Committee insisted that action in defense of jobs was possible and necessary, stressing that only a **global** counteroffensive could be effective in fighting the cereal giant. It took

news of the struggle in Sydney first to US workers and then to their counterparts at Kellogg's plants around the world, particularly in Manchester, Great Britain; Bremen, Germany; and London, Ontario (Canada). In August, Dove travelled to the Battle Creek plant to inform workers about what had happened in Sydney and worked to establish links to coordinate a struggle in defense of jobs.

In an interview with the IWB published on August 28, 1995, headlined, "My trip to Battle Creek shows the potential for uniting the working class," Dove explained, "From the onset of the fight we understood that the job losses in Sydney were part of Kellogg's attack on workers throughout the world. The company's recent announcement that it is going to eliminate over 1,000 jobs in the US confirms that Kellogg's has a global strategy to restructure the corporation and maximize profits..."

"For five years, since I was first hired by Kellogg's, the Socialist Labour League and I have opposed the demand of the company, backed by the unions, that workers accept changes in work practices and other concessions in order to make the Australian plant internationally competitive. We warned that this pitting of Australian workers against workers in other plants around the world was part of a never-ending drive to push workers harder..."

"The record of officials like [then AFGM Local 3 Business Agent Rocky] Marsh in the US, Australia and everywhere else shows that when they say they will defend as many jobs 'as possible,' this means that no jobs will be defended. It means they will continue to do everything 'possible' to make the companies competitive and profitable. The AFGM local has already accepted the destruction of 1,800 jobs since 1975."

Confirming Dove's warning, in the decades since, the BCTGM has presided over the destruction of thousands more jobs.

Workers responded warmly to the visit of Dove to Battle Creek and visits by other representatives of the ICFI to factories in Germany, Britain, and Canada, taking leaflets, buying hundreds of newspapers, and donating generously.

In his IWB interview, Dove summarized this reception, saying, "When I talked to workers outside the Kellogg's plant, it became apparent how workers share the same concerns over job security, health and safety, wages and other necessities like housing and education. The warm response I received in Battle Creek shows the tremendous potential to link up the struggles of the working class. My trip also demonstrates that there is only one organization that is forging the leadership to unite workers against the transnational corporations—the International Committee of the Fourth International."

Workers at the Bremen factory in Germany told ICFI representatives that they appreciated learning about this struggle as their union had kept them entirely in the dark about firings in Australia and the US. This was also the case in Manchester in Great Britain where, as the IWB reported, leaflets from the ICFI were "passed hand to hand throughout the plant and posted on notice-boards." A Canadian worker thanked a distributor of the IWB for bringing news of the struggle to the plant in London. As the newspaper reported, "One of those workers, who spoke to the IWB, said that the union in Toronto, a local of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers, had put up no resistance to the closure" of that facility in 1992, which had destroyed 300 jobs.

Dove's trip to the US, along with the efforts of the International Committee to connect all Kellogg's workers globally in defense of jobs, marked an important step forward in the class struggle. Notwithstanding the ability of the company to fire the workers in Sydney, close the San Leandro plant in the US, and continue to cut jobs globally—developments that were only possible due to the treacherous role of the BCTGM (then called the AFGM) in the US and by its counterparts internationally—the ICFI's campaign demonstrated conclusively that a real appeal across international boundaries would find a hearing among workers. That is even more critical today.

Interviewed this week by the WSWs, Warwick Dove had this to say to striking Kellogg's workers:

I see that the company is threatening you with plant closures and the hiring of replacement workers as part of its efforts to impose their new regime. In the 26 years since I visited the Battle Creek plant, it has gone from 1,700 workers to 330. These massive job losses have increased the company's profits and the salary of the CEO. Workers' wages have meanwhile stagnated along with health care benefits, though production has been vastly increased.

Workers have worked through double shifts and extended overtime throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain food production as "essential workers."

Twenty-six years in a worker's life is a long time and while I no longer work in the food production industry, the experiences you are having with the company and their union assistants are just like those of almost three decades ago.

I support and salute your resolute struggle. But we must draw the conclusion that the company and the union are one and the same. The methods of collaboration, compromise, and concessions of the trade unions in every country lead to disaster.

The difference today is that there is a growing rebellion by the working class in every country against the union sellouts and betrayals. Now we must take the next step and form new independent committees which are not tied to the union but are run and organised by the rank and file, to carry out a genuine struggle for decent wages, permanent jobs and all the social rights of the working-class.

Dove's call to form independent rank-and-file committees is extremely timely. To take forward the struggle to defend the jobs that remain at Kellogg's, re-establish an eight-hour day, end the hated "two-tier" system and safeguard health and retirement benefits, it is necessary, but not sufficient, to vote down the tentative agreement on Sunday.

Rank-and-file committees must be established in the US and every country in which Kellogg's has operations and the closest fighting unity must be established between them. These committees must be independent of the existing union structures, democratically-controlled by workers themselves and committed to struggle, not collaboration with corporate management.

This is the essential lesson of the work carried out by the ICFI in 1995.



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