

Kellogg's strikers denounce mass firing threat, two-tier wages from the picket lines in Battle Creek, Michigan

James Martin
12 December 2021

Striking Kellogg's workers remain defiant in the face of mass firing threats by the company, following their rejection last week of a concessions contract brokered by the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union (BCTGM). Kellogg's threats against the striking workers have sparked outrage among broader layers of workers, with increasing numbers voicing their support for the strike.

Over 1,400 Kellogg's workers in four states have been on strike for more than two months, part of a growing movement of the working class across the US and internationally. The workers are opposed to the creation of a two-tier system, below-inflation pay raises and other givebacks that would keep them working in sweatshop conditions with 60-80-hour work weeks. Decades of concessions have turned the clock back from previous generations when workers at Kellogg's had a pension and a 40-hour work week.

The hellish conditions at the company today, in the middle of yet another surge of the global COVID-19 pandemic, were underscored when a fire broke out at the facility in Lancaster, Pennsylvania on Saturday night, where Kellogg's is barely able to keep the facility operating with scabs. According to ABC 27, a piece of machinery overheated, and smoke spread throughout the facility.

Fearing the situation could touch off a wider social explosion in the working class, the Biden administration intervened Friday with a nervous statement on Kellogg's plans to permanently replace strikers. Instead, Biden prefers a union-enforced "settlement" through which the same concessions can be imposed without such open provocations, similar to those the BCTGM pushed through to end strikes at

Nabisco and Frito-Lay earlier in the year.

"The 'no' vote is very good," one striking worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* on the picket line in Battle Creek, Michigan this weekend. "The path from the lower to the upper tier [under the contract which was rejected] has no cap and could take up to nine years. With no cap, it could take an exceedingly long time. There's no job security either, which we were after. The main spearhead for us is eliminating the two tiers.

"This plant is set up to run hard. They played with production numbers to make it look bad. They shut down the Mini Wheats line. They want to kill this plant, possibly since this is the strongest plant in terms of labor. Kellogg's has a history of vindictiveness against its employees. This used to be a self-contained facility, which took in raw rolls of paper and raw grain, which was turned into finished packaging and food."

As an example of the type of dangerous conditions they face on the job, a worker cited an incident where a 1,400-pound skid fell on one of his coworkers, damaging his spine, tearing his rotator cuff and leaving him with a severe concussion. His coworker was denied workers' compensation, he said.

Another striker added: "The biggest thing is Kellogg's is not getting off with the two-tier system. That's really why we're here. It's the future they want to no longer have benefits that [legacy and retired] workers have, including retirement benefits, health care. These are all the reasons why you put time into working here. At one point they capped the lower tier, now they opened it up so they can hire as many second-tier workers as they can. They split us into the haves and have-nots, the legacy versus second-tier workers."

A senior worker on the picket line recalled the international campaign by the International Committee in 1995 against job cuts at Kellogg's, in the course of which Warwick Dove, a laid-off Australian Kellogg's worker, traveled to Battle Creek to appeal for a united struggle of American and Australian workers.

"Yeah, I remembered that," he said. "This [layoffs] has been happening for over 30 years. They take a little part here then take it out. Thirty years later people ask, 'Well, how did this happen?' It's an attack on labor, is what this is. Kellogg's doesn't want long-term liability. They want to rent you and then they're done and you're done."

"In 1995 they called me a liability to the company because of what they were paying us. We have worked here 32 years. It's not like they're giving us anything. We earned it! They don't want long-term benefits. We used to be the benchmark for all cereal workers."

"The new people won't have what these legacy guys have," he added. "You have a guy making 40-50 percent more than the guy next to him doing the same job. Back in 2015, the union brought the tiers in here saying that's a good idea. Anytime you give something, it's never a good idea because you'll never get it back."

He added that Biden's statement was toothless. "I don't know how much weight that will carry."

Another worker chimed in on the defense of the younger generation. "We're here to support the younger workers, the next generation coming in. We [legacy workers] could sign that contract and walk away with a ton. Kellogg's talks to the news about giving a 3 percent raise and benefits. Well, they didn't. They gave the upper-tier more to sell out on the lower tier and pass it."

"We used to have 4,000 workers here and now have 325," said another picketer. "During the negotiations, the president told us we need to go back to collective bargaining because the company is going to cut 174 jobs here. We'll be down to 151 jobs."

The race to the bottom was the reason he said a united, international response was needed to fight Kellogg's threats. "United is better than divided like what we have. Who would've thought the hometown plant wouldn't be here. That's very possible in the next five years."

In spite of the intense anti-Mexican campaign by the

BCTGM, aimed at scapegoating foreign workers for job losses and wage cuts in the United States, many strikers expressed sympathy and solidarity with their brothers and sisters south of the border. "Right now, Mexico is like the lower tier. That's why things are going there because it's cheaper there," a worker said. "They're also trying to get the lower tier here in the US so it's cheaper here. It's not that they're sending jobs to Mexico. We don't hate Mexico, no. They're the lower tier that Kellogg's been building up, driving a wedge between us and Mexican workers. We need to unite."

Kellogg's workers must unite with their counterparts in Mexico, Australia and internationally to fight the multinational corporation. Moreover, they can put no trust in the BCTGM or the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, which serves as a representative of the corporate and financial aristocracy. Instead, Kellogg's workers must urgently take the struggle out of the hands of the "union" by forming an independent rank-and-file strike committee, linking up with other sections of workers in a fight for substantially higher wages, better working conditions, equality in the workplace and an end to sweatshop conditions.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact