

Less than 24 hours before it announces sellout agreement, BCTGM tosses insulting \$200 holiday “gift” to Kellogg’s strikers

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On Wednesday, the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union (BCTGM) announced with great fanfare that it would “gift” the striking Kellogg’s workers across four states \$200, on top of the starvation weekly strike pay it has been paying out for more than two and a half months.

The announcement came as the union was conspiring behind the scenes with the company to bring back yet another sellout tentative agreement, which it announced the following day. The deal is almost identical to the one that Kellogg’s workers rejected by an overwhelming margin two weeks ago, and contains language allowing for the unlimited expansion of the lower-paid second tier of “transitional” workers in the company’s cereal factories.

A tweet on Wednesday by Michelle Ellis, BCTGM’s digital media spokesperson, stated, “This week, the @BCTGM Exec. Board unanimously voted to gift each active #KelloggStrike & Jon Donaire member \$200 + back dues to keep everyone in good standing through the Holidays (in addition to their reg. weekly strike benefit).”

She added, “2021 truly has been a ‘workers’ movement for the ages,’ to quote BCTGM Pres. Shelton in this month’s *BCTGM News*. One thing I am sure of: our Union is doing it’s [sic] part and I have never been prouder to work here.”

Ellis’s statement is staggering in its hypocrisy. For months, the union has been starving out Kellogg’s workers on the picket line on \$105 per week in strike pay. Finding it impossible to survive on these starvation rations, many workers have been forced to seek other employment, and a few have broken ranks and crossed the picket line. To supplement their income, the BCTGM has set up Gofundme campaigns in which workers beg for charity.

This degrading spectacle reminds one of the “Dash for Cash” event at a recent hockey game in the Midwest, where teachers were made to get on their hands and knees to gather up one-dollar bills to help pay for school supplies.

The announcement comes after the union has met with a stony silence the company’s threats to hire permanent replacements after workers rejected the last tentative agreement. To date, the only public statement from the union on the threat is a response to an *earlier* statement by President Joe Biden, in which the union heaped praise on his toothless statement criticizing the move by the company but committing to nothing to prevent it. The silence of the BCTGM on the threat, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned last week, indicated its support for the move.

This has been confirmed by the announcement of yet another sellout contract. Between threats from management and starvation strike pay from the union, together with endless votes on virtually the same deal, both parties are seeking to break the resistance of Kellogg’s workers.

Workers at Kellogg’s are fighting against issues that workers elsewhere will recognize as universal. These include the hated two-tier wage structure, wage increases well below the rate of inflation, and relentless overtime that has made seven-day, 80-hour workweeks common. On this basis, Kellogg’s has experienced a surge in profits during the pandemic, which increased 30 percent to \$1.25 billion last year, which the company uses to finance tens of millions of dollars each year in dividends to its wealthy shareholders.

The \$200 “gift,” meanwhile, expresses the contempt of the well-heeled union bureaucracy for the workers they claim to represent. They expect to be congratulated for their generosity in tossing out sums of money that, for the BCTGM, amounts to pocket change. Between the national headquarters and the union locals, the BCTGM controls a total of \$72 million in assets, according to filings from this year with the Department of Labor. The entire \$200 bonus, spread across 1,400 strikers, amounts to less than the \$288,502 that union president Anthony Shelton pocketed last year. Unsurprisingly, Shelton has continued with his normal salary throughout the strike.

These assets are workers’ money, paid for out of their

dues. But the union treats it as a personal piggy bank out of which it pays six-figure salaries for dozens of officials. By limiting strike pay to the bare minimum, they are increasing the share that is left for themselves. After 11 weeks on strike, at \$105 per week per worker, the total amount the union has spent on the strike amounts to about \$1.6 million, or barely more than 2 percent of its total assets.

But by the standard of the American trade unions, the BCTGM is small potatoes. Again according to DOL filings, the trade unions in the United States controlled \$35 billion in assets, with the 11 wealthiest unions each controlling over \$1 billion. These figures have exploded over the past four decades, even as union membership has collapsed as a result of massive job cuts. But through its control of corporate stock and lucrative investment funds, the union bureaucracy has a financial stake in “jointly” forcing through concessions with management.

This is why, in spite of the fact that the US is seeing the greatest upsurge in worker militancy in generations, the unions have forced through one sellout contract after another, virtually all of which contain wage increases below inflation. The bureaucracy is terrified of this movement, which threatens to upend the gravy train they have been riding since the 1980s.

To take only one recent example, the Alliance of Health Care Unions canceled a strike and, earlier this month, forced through a deal for 52,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente containing wage increases of between 2 and 3 percent (current inflation is 6.8 percent). Moreover, it commits the union to helping management find further cost savings each year of the contract. In an act of collective punishment, workers’ “performance bonuses” will now be mostly calculated from the success of this cost-cutting campaign, meaning they will be punished with sharp cuts to their bonuses if these cuts do not matriculate.

In exchange, the unions will be given roughly \$50 million in corporate financing during the life of the agreement through the Labor Management Partnership, whose stated goal on its website is the prevention of strikes, and other joint schemes.

In 1845, Karl Marx’s future collaborator Friedrich Engels wrote sharply on the hypocrisy of capitalist charity in Britain: “As though you rendered the proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practising your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!”

He added further, in a scathing and brilliant analysis of the class interests and function behind charity in capitalist society:

The English bourgeoisie is charitable out of self-interest; it gives nothing outright, but regards its gifts as a business matter, makes a bargain with the poor, saying: “If I spend this much upon benevolent institutions, I thereby purchase the right not to be troubled any further, and you are bound thereby to stay in your dusky holes and not to irritate my tender nerves by exposing your misery. You shall despair as before, but you shall despair unseen, this I require, this I purchase with my subscription of twenty pounds for the infirmary!”

The same applies with full force to the BCTGM and the unions as a whole. They are no different than the calculating, hypocritical English bourgeoisie of the 19th century, pretending to give back a tiny fraction of its fortunes to the very workers they help exploit.

Kellogg’s workers must draw the lessons from this revealing episode and take their struggle out of the hands of the BCTGM bureaucracy by forming a rank-and-file strike committee, composed of and answerable to workers themselves. Such a committee should fight for the adequate provisioning of their struggle with a seven-fold increase in strike pay to \$750 per week, and appeal for the broadest possible support from workers across the United States and internationally.

Kellogg’s workers: contact the WSWS to learn more about forming a rank-and-file strike committee in your area.



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