

Leaked email exposes union-management conspiracy to defeat Kellogg's strike as Sanders attempts to deflect anger towards Mexico

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18 December 2021

Note: an earlier version of this article incorrectly said that More Perfect Union was the first to report on the management email. In fact, it was first reported by Michigan Advance on December 17. The article has been edited to make this correction.

A leaked management email has revealed the existence of a conspiracy between the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union and Kellogg's management to force an end to the two-and-a-half-month strike by 1,400 US cereal workers. On Thursday, Kellogg's and the union announced a new tentative agreement which is almost identical to the one which workers rejected two weeks ago, and which allows for the unlimited expansion of the company's use of lower-paid second tier "transitional" workers. A snap vote has been called for this Sunday.

The email, first reported by Laina Stebbins of *Michigan Advance*, was apparently sent to several members of plant management. It declares, "In short, overall bucket of money (cost) stays the same. Just shifts money from one bucket to another." It adds with malicious satisfaction, "No gain overall for them [Kellogg's workers] with 3 more weeks of strike and no income. No ratification bonus.

"We are confident this will pass," the emails add because "*most of the union's negotiating committee is for this and plans to recommend it.* (emphasis added). I know everyone is tired and tense in the plant, please try to focus on what we need to do. Please try to keep negotiations talk to a minimum in the plant around the workers."

The email exposes BCTGM as complicit in management's attempt to break the strike, and that management is relying upon the union to "pass" a contract which workers already rejected. Moreover, the instructions to fellow managers to keep radio silence around workers on the contract is a clear signal that they are relying principally on the union to browbeat opposition on their own behalf.

Workers should respond by rejecting the entire fraudulent framework of this so-called "collective bargaining," which is exposed as, in reality, a union-management conspiracy to break their courageous struggle. The entire bargaining committee should

be kicked out, and a new bargaining committee elected consisting of the most trusted rank-and-file workers from the shop floor.

Last week, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the silence from the BCTGM in response to management's threat to fire workers en masse following the last contract vote amounted to tacit consent, and that the union was working with management to overcome workers' resistance through a combination of threats and intimidation. This has now been proven beyond a doubt, first by the "new" tentative agreement itself, and now by the leaked email.

In the days leading up to the election, the BCTGM is engaged in a massive campaign of censorship. Only hours after the TA was announced, it archived several local Facebook groups with thousands of members in order to prevent workers from speaking to each other and building up opposition to the contract. In this, they are taking a page out of the playbook of the United Auto Workers, which used similar methods this fall to force through a re-vote of a contract which workers had also rejected in order to end a month-long strike at John Deere.

Despite these moves, workers remain defiant. "I'm still a NO vote," said one veteran worker. "Kellogg's is getting desperate. The big shots came through Battle Creek this morning. I don't think they liked what they saw. They're manipulating stock prices, acting like we've given up. I hope the members are smarter than the leadership on this BS agreement.

"This contract would make me lots of money," he added, "and get me the four years I need to retire, but I don't care about that right now. I'm sick of seeing the young people getting screwed. This is still not good for them. I'm voting NO. If it goes down, [Kellogg's] will bring another before this quarterly report comes out."

Another striking Kellogg's worker said, "This contract is the same as the last one, just a few words changed around. If we vote it in now, this whole strike will have been for nothing. I hope we vote NO!"

The worker denounced the BCTGM's losing strategy. "It's like the Detroit Lions. How many years have they played 'not-to-lose'

and they end up losing every time. You can only win if you play to win.”

“We’ve seen this type of stuff before,” he said. “In the 2015 contract, when they started the transitional lower tier, a lot of people were talking about the shady deals that BCTGM had taken.”

But in spite of determination of the workers, the strike is in danger as long as conduct is left in the hands of the union bureaucracy. Now more than ever, workers must move to take struggle into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file strike committee to oppose betrayals of union, appeal for broadest possible support and develop a strategy for victory.

Bernie Sanders stumps for the union, promotes “America First” nationalism at Battle Creek rally

Earlier in the day, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders traveled to Battle Creek, Michigan in an effort to drum up support for the union and divert workers’ anger. The event, which lasted less than thirty minutes and was largely comprised of the same demagogic phrases which Sanders has employed for years, had an unreal character to it, presenting the BCTGM officialdom as the vanguard of the fight against Kellogg’s even as they are deep in a campaign to force through a sellout contract. The very existence of the tentative agreement went almost entirely unmentioned except for a brief reference to it by Local 3G President Trevor Bidelman, who made certain muted criticisms of the deal, suggesting he expects the contract will be voted down.

Sanders attempted to present the central issue of the strike as a disloyal US-based company threatening to ship American jobs to Mexico. At the climax of his speech, he declared, “If you love America, you love the workers. And if you love American workers, you don’t ship their jobs to desperate people in Mexico and pay them 90 cents an hour.”

This reactionary “America First” nationalism is no different in principle from that of Donald Trump and extreme right. In fact, Breitbart, whose former editor Steve Bannon is a key Trump ally, is attempting to capitalize upon the BCTGM’s own anti-Mexican campaign to bolster the credibility of its own fascistic politics.

This anti-Mexican demagogy serves only to isolate the strike from its most powerful reservoir of support, the international working class. For all of his demagogy against the “billionaire class,” Sanders’ presentation of “disloyal” Kellogg’s management leaves open the possibility of “loyal” American exploiters whose interests are united with the workers. Indeed, at the end of his speech, Sanders called on the crowd to appeal to the corporate oligarchy itself to “create an economy that works for all of us, and not just the few.” This has particularly dangerous implications as US capitalism is preparing for military conflict against nuclear-armed Russia and China in a desperate attempt to maintain its world supremacy.

In fact, “America First” nationalism has been a longstanding and central element in Sanders’ politics. In 2015, he denounced open

borders as a “Koch Brothers” proposal which would “make everyone in America poorer.” When he returned to this theme in 2019, he earned praise from neo-Nazi leader Richard Spencer, who organized the fascist riot in Charlottesville, Virginia. Sanders is not a Nazi, but his promotion of anti-Mexican nationalism serves only to disarm the working class and lend political legitimacy to the far right.

No matter how it is presented, the promotion of the possibility of the identity of interests between the corporations and the workers, within the framework of the national state, can only serve to bind workers hand and foot to their “own” native exploiters. This is why, in the midst of a demagogic speech attacking Kellogg’s, Sanders also praised the “sacrifice” made by Kellogg’s workers in laboring for weeks at a time without a single day off as having helped “save America during the pandemic.” This is a lie which has been promoted by the food production industry itself to justify its enforcement of brutal overtime and its refusal to shut down production during the pandemic.

In fact, independent studies have shown that the American food supply was never under any danger even in the early stages of the pandemic. However, by keeping workers on the job as long as possible, Kellogg’s and other major food companies have seen their profits soar, even as tens of thousands of food workers have been infected and hundreds have died.

In contrast to the economic nationalism of Sanders, many Kellogg’s workers see workers in other countries as their natural allies. As one worker noted, “The support we have been receiving from all over the country, all over the world—it is really moving. We are being followed by a lot of people, and I don’t know what will happen if we win or if we lose, but it is very powerful to see Palestinian workers in Israel holding up a banner in support of our strike.”

Kellogg’s workers have enormous support in the US and internationally. But to win their struggle, they must take it out of the hands of the BCTGM and fight to build independent rank-and-file committees that can develop a strategy to win the strike. Their strike is part of a growing rebellion of workers all across the world against pandemic conditions and decades of capitalist exploitation.

“Something big has got to happen,” the Kellogg’s worker concluded. “And it’s coming: a revolution.”

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



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