

# BCTGM union declares passage of contract at Kellogg's, ending nearly three-month strike

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Following voting on Sunday and Monday, the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union announced the ratification of new five-year agreement this morning. The deal contains massive concessions for 1,400 Kellogg's cereal workers and ends their nearly three-month strike.

The agreement was predictably hailed by the union and its supporters in the Democratic Party as a massive “victory.” It is nothing of the sort. The contract is virtually identical to the one workers overwhelmingly rejected three weeks ago. It expands the two-tier wage system rammed through in the last contract in 2015, removing all caps on the number of so-called transitional workers the company can hire.

While the BCTGM claims the deal includes “no permanent two-tier system” and a “clear path to regular full-time employment,” transitional workers will be strung out on a largely unobtainable pathway to promotion to first tier status, which will take on average six years for each worker, according to the company's estimates. Workers on this six-year treadmill could easily be laid off before reaching top pay, and there is no guarantee the BCTGM will not agree to an extension of the “pathway” in its next contract five years from now before workers reach their six-year mark.

The deal contains only a single small wage increase in the first year of the five-year agreement for first tier “legacy” workers, with only cost of living adjustments for the remaining four years. Inflation in the United States is currently at 6.8 percent, its highest level in four decades.

The union announced the outcome of the vote to workers in a terse, one-sentence email, which reads in full:

Brothers and Sisters,

The tentative agreement has been accepted by the Union body.

In Solidarity,

BCTGM RTEC Negotiating Committee

This email amounts to a provocation against the striking workers, who were determined to fight for future generations of

Kellogg's workers. The union has not released any further information on the vote, including turnout, vote totals or even the margin of 'victory.' Local 3G President Trevor Bidelman said the vote was “close” but claimed he had not been provided with exact numbers.

Under the circumstances, there is no reason to assume the contract was passed by the membership at all. Given the entirely undemocratic character of the union's “ratification” process, workers have raised doubts that their ballots were properly counted at all.

The procedure used by the BCTGM is highly unusual and opaque, even by the standards of the union bureaucracy. Instead of counting ballots on site in the local union halls, votes are shipped to the union national headquarters in Maryland, outside of the view of workers. They are then combined into a single stack of ballots, and not counted by plant. The entire procedure provides ample room for ballot stuffing.

The voting itself took place under conditions of a massive campaign of online censorship by the union, which shut down local Facebook pages to prevent workers from discussing the contract or organizing opposition to the deal. At the same time, a management email leaked to the press last Friday proved that the deal would cost the company exactly the same as the one workers rejected, and that the company was relying upon the bargaining committee to ram it through. No contract negotiated under such conditions can be considered legitimate, and workers should consider the contract null and void.

The union's announcement provoked immediate anger and suspicion among Kellogg's workers. “Those stupid simple bastards [in the union] sold us out,” one worker at the Battle Creek, Michigan plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I just feel the fight has just begun,” another Battle Creek worker said. “We didn't even get half of what we went out for. It's just disappointing.” Many workers also took to social media to challenge the union to release the vote totals.

Bidelman, whose union local covers the Battle Creek plant, which has been a center of rank-and-file opposition, has been posturing over the past several days by making certain criticisms of the deal and attempting to distance himself from the outcome. According to *Huffington Post*, Bidelman told the outlet that “Kellogg's threat to permanently replace strikers”

after the first TA was rejected three weeks ago “turned a lot of votes.”

If this was the case, it is because the union wanted management’s threats to “turn” votes. The BCTGM and other unions like the United Auto Workers made it clear they would leave the embattled Kellogg’s workers isolated if the company moved ahead with its strikebreaking plans. At the same time, the BCTGM, which has more than \$72 million in assets at both the national and local level, has been starving workers on the picket line with \$105 in weekly strike pay for nearly three months. In a cynical stunt, the union gave workers an insulting \$200 ‘Christmas gift’ last week which cost the BCTGM less than the \$288,000 annual salary of national union president Anthony Shelton.

Hostile to any united struggle between US workers and the thousands of Kellogg’s workers at the company’s international operations, the BCTGM launched a filthy anti-Mexican campaign calling on the company to pull out of its operations south of the border. Bidelman was one of the most strident promoters of this campaign and gave stupid and racist comments to the press casting doubt on the safety of food produced with Mexican water.

At the same time, Local 3G officials actively sought to discourage workers at Battle Creek by claiming that workers at other plants were wavering, threatening to make their opposition moot. The purpose of this was to depress the margin of defeat at Battle Creek by enough votes that even a slim vote in favor at the other three plants would be enough to pass the contract. Similar methods were employed last month by the United Auto Workers to shut down a strike at John Deere and force through a contract which workers had already rejected. If in fact the vote was narrowly approved, this maneuvering by Local 3G would have played a central role in its passage.

Within minutes of the announcement Tuesday morning, the union and its supporters unleashed a huge lying campaign on social media hailing the deal as a victory. AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler declared on twitter, “The @BCTGM Kellogg’s strike is over. Working people stood their ground, and working people won. The new contract includes: NO permanent two-tier wage system, a significant increase in pensions, cost of living raises, and more.”

The biggest lie, which was taken up and endlessly repeated on Twitter and social media, is that the contract eliminates the “permanent” two-tier structure. This is ambiguously worded to give the opposite impression of what is in the contract. Even in the doubtful case that the majority of workers reach their six-year threshold, they will first be subjected to work brutal levels of overtime, including seven-day, 80-hour work weeks which are commonplace in the plants.

The number of workers who will “graduate” each year is defined in the contract as equal to three percent of a plant’s workforce, meaning that if the company chooses to increase the ratio of transitional employees in the plant—which it has the

power to do under the terms of the contract—workers will be forced to wait even longer.

The sellout of the Kellogg’s strike is only the latest, and among the most naked and brazen, of a series of betrayals carried out by the trade unions over the past several months. These also include the sellout of struggles at Volvo Trucks, John Deere, Kaiser Permanente, Hollywood film and TV production workers, Frito-Lay and Nabisco, which the BCTGM betrayed just before the beginning of the Kellogg’s strike. As the pro-corporate unions worked to enforce massive concessions and keep wage increases below the rate of inflation, the unions borrowed liberally from each others’ playbooks, with the BCTGM relying in particular on the methods employed by the UAW to shut down the strikes at Volvo Trucks and Deere.

The deal also exposes the role of the Biden administration, which has claimed repeatedly to be the most ‘pro-labor’ president in American history, and the Democratic Party in working with the unions to enforce these sellouts. When Kellogg’s threatened to simply fire workers en masse in retaliation after the first TA was rejected, Biden intervened to prevent a needlessly open confrontation which could spark a broader response in the working class. Instead, Biden called on the company and union to work out a deal, and no doubt Biden officials were centrally involved in brokering the current agreement.

The most pernicious role was played by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who visited Battle Creek Friday to give his usual empty demagoguery against the “billionaire class” while attacking Kellogg’s from the right for being disloyal to the United States. Even though the new TA had already been announced the night before, Sanders did not mention it during his remarks, in order to provide cover for the union.

The struggle at Kellogg’s is far from over. The union and the company will now send workers back into the plants on the cusp of a massive surge in COVID-19 cases driven by the Omicron variant, where they will face demands for relentless speedup to make up for lost production. Workers must organize themselves independently to demand the temporary shutdown of the plants to stop transmission, with full compensation for affected workers.

Now more than ever, the task facing Kellogg’s workers is the formation of rank-and-file committees as new organizations independent of and opposed to the treachery of the union. The *World Socialist Web Site*, as it has in numerous struggles, stands ready to assist workers. Contact the WSWS to get more information about building rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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