

# The issues in the unionization vote at Hershey's Stuarts Draft, Virginia plant

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At the Hershey Company factory in Stuarts Draft, Virginia, its second largest in the United States, over 1,300 workers are voting on whether to join the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' union (BCTGM).

Voting started at the end of February. The results will be tallied on March 24. Workers at the plant make Hershey's staples such as Reese's, Almond Joy and other peanut-based products that are shipped throughout the United States and world.

The workers face brutal sweatshop conditions and face constant harassment. Management forces mandatory overtime seven days a week for months on end. Some workers have worked over 50 days without a day off and are threatened with termination if they refuse, leaving no time for family.

Management punishes workers for using their accrued sick days, and they are penalized for leaving early for a medical emergency. The company also bars workers from training programs and enforces loopholes to keep workers at lower pay scales. Newer, younger employees are placed on a two-tiered wage and benefit system.

One worker wrote on job search website indeed.com, "Mandatory 7-day weeks, days off only come when you work OT. The attendance policy is impossible. COVID guidelines are a joke. People would get disciplined for being sick and lose their jobs even if it was COVID related."

"Management just makes up rules as they go," another worker stated. "They have no empathy towards the employees ... if a manager tells you wrong about a forever changing policy, they don't get reprimanded for telling you wrong. You get reprimanded for receiving the wrong information. This whole place is a mess and is morally bankrupt."

Hershey's workers looking for a way to fight one of the most profitable corporations in the world under conditions of skyrocketing inflation, rising gas prices, an ongoing pandemic that has killed almost 1 million Americans and the threat of world war, will not find it in the pro-company BCTGM.

The BCTGM is spending substantial resources in a top-down unionization drive at Hershey's, sending in high-level international officials, in a push to obtain more dues-paying members.

The BCTGM director of organization, John Price, kicked off the campaign last September. Sections of the corporate media have promoted the unionization drive, with the *Guardian* and longtime Democratic Party supporter and billionaire George Soros' More Perfect Union running articles, videos and social media campaigns sponsoring the effort. Bernie Sanders took to Twitter to throw his support behind the union apparatus as part of his phony protest to corporate America. Yard signs advocating a "yes" vote dot the town

of Stuarts Draft, home to 12,000 people.

Over the past several years, the corporatist trade unions have launched several unionization drives, including at Starbucks and an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, in line with President Biden's White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment order. The aim of this project is further integrating the pro-company unions with the state and corporate management to smother any rebellion by rank-and-file workers.

After five months of campaigning, BCTGM has not placed any concrete demands or proposals for better conditions for workers at the plant, instead focusing entirely on Hershey's anti-union stance.

## The BCTGM during the Kellogg's strike

The strike by 1,400 Kellogg's workers last year against intolerable conditions should serve as a stark warning of the role the BCTGM will play at the Stuarts Draft plant if workers vote for union representation.

Last winter, workers struck at Kellogg's plants in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Battle Creek, Michigan; Omaha, Nebraska; and Memphis, Tennessee, against the same atrocious conditions of 60- to 80-hour weeks and the hated two-tiered wage system, which the union had sanctioned in the previous contract signed with Kellogg's management in 2015. Over several decades BCTGM has axed pensions and agreed to the elimination of thousands of jobs, while Kellogg's profits have surged.

After workers walked out last fall, BCTGM kept workers on poverty-level strike pay, refused to broaden the strike by reaching out to workers in other industries. Instead, the BCTGM engaged in a reactionary and divisive anti-Mexican campaign, scapegoating Kellogg's workers in Mexico for conditions in the Battle Creek plant. Eventually the union brought back a contract identical to the one workers had previously rejected. This concessionary contract expanded the use of the tier system, provided wage increases below the rate of inflation, a pay cut for workers, and made future layoffs inevitable.

The most notorious example of the collusion between BCTGM officials and Kellogg's management was a leaked email exposing the backroom deals worked out between the two parties to break the strike and force through a sellout contract.

First reported by Laina Stebbins of *Michigan Advance*, the memo said: "In short, overall bucket of money (cost) stays the same. Just

shifts money from one bucket to another. No gain overall for them [Kellogg's workers] with 3 more weeks of strike and no income. No ratification bonus." It then said the contract would pass 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."

If the union is voted in to ostensibly "bargain" on behalf of the workers with Hershey's management, workers will have to wage a two-front war against both the BCTGM and the company.

## The Hershey Company

The Hershey Company is a multinational company headquartered in Hershey, Pennsylvania, and is one of the largest chocolate companies in the world, producing all types of chocolate products, baked goods and beverages in over 60 countries and employing thousands of workers.

Hershey's has production facilities in Lancaster, Hazelton and Hershey, Pennsylvania; Memphis, Tennessee; Stuarts Draft, Virginia; and a museum in Robinson, Illinois. Outside the United States, Hershey's production facilities are located in Sao Roque, Brazil; Saint-Hyacinthe and Granby, Quebec, Canada; Mandideep, Madhya Pradesh, India; Johor, Malaysia, the second largest in the entire company; El Salto and Monterrey, Mexico; and Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Hershey's also sources the main ingredient in chocolate, cocoa, from child labor mostly from Africa.

With a global manufacturing empire, profits for Hershey's have hit record levels, especially during the pandemic. Gross profit in 2021 was \$4.049 billion, an increase of 9.38 percent from the previous year, with net income of \$1.47 billion in 2021, compared to \$1.28 billion in 2020 and \$1.15 billion in 2019.

"In 2021, we delivered a record year of production and double-digit sales and earnings growth, with a strong finish and momentum heading into 2022," said Michele Buck, president and CEO of the company. Hershey's anticipates increased profits this year from cost-cutting and raising the price of their chocolate products. Buck takes in over \$19 million, or over 600 times the median yearly salary of a Hershey's worker.

On top of this, Ralph Norman, former Democrat governor of Virginia, gave Hershey's a whopping taxpayer handout of \$1.6 million to invest in the Virginia facility, making the company eligible for additional tax breaks and incentives.

The company is pulling no punches to block the BCTGM, believing it can discipline its workforce without the help of a union, even though at two of its five plants in the United States it has worked with these organizations to strengthen profit margins.

The company has created a unionbusting website, showcasing videos of supposed Hershey's workers giving testimonies of the idyllic conditions and wages at the plant and advocating for a "no" vote in the upcoming election. Additionally, the web page details the hemorrhaging of BCTGM's membership over the past decade and many of its failed attempts to unionize workplaces. Hershey's also sacked a longtime and hated manager at the Stuarts Draft plant to ease tensions on the floor.

## The way forward for Hershey's workers

Hershey's workers have a long history of fighting against the multinational corporation. In 1937 during the Great Depression, 600 Hershey's workers in Pennsylvania, organized in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), struck after Milton Hershey, the founder of the company, reduced wages and bonuses and kept workers on erratic schedules and 60-hour weeks, despite making \$37 million in aftertax profits from 1930 to 1936. Workers demanded a 40-hour week and a 10 percent wage increase.

Hershey's used strong-arm tactics to smash the CIO-affiliated workers, paying goons from as far away as New York City, supplemented by farmers and veterans, to attack workers in the factory, arming them with bats, pipes, hammers and other weapons.

In 2002 after working without a contract for five months, workers at two Hershey's plants struck, defying the agreement between union leadership and management to raise out-of-pocket expenses for health care. Seventy-seven percent of rank-and-file workers rejected the proposed agreement.

Workers at Hershey's should place absolutely no credence in the claims by the BCTGM that it will fight for workers at the Stuarts Draft facility. Instead, workers should start forming a rank-and-file committee to formulate and fight for the demands workers want, not what Hershey's or the BCTGM says the company can afford. This should start with the elimination of the two-tiered system, the institution of regular 40-hour, 5-day workweeks, a substantial pay raise and COLA to be paid from the billions in profits that Hershey's has made off the backs of workers, who have risked their lives throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

This committee should reach out to Hershey's workers in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Illinois, and in countries where Hershey's makes its chocolate products. It would be part of a growing network of rank-and-file committees in many industries across the United States and globe fighting against the corporations and their lapdogs, the corporatist trade unions. Contact the WSWs for assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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