BCTGM drive at Hershey in Virginia ends with decisive vote against union affiliation

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Workers at the Hershey candy plant in Stuarts Draft, Virginia overwhelmingly rejected the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' (BCTGM) in a union recognition vote conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) last week. The company's second largest manufacturing plant in the US employs over 1,300 workers and about 1,100 workers were eligible to vote in the election.

Hershey workers voted 79 percent (843) against and 21 percent (225) in favor of the BCTGM. The "no" vote occurred despite brutal working conditions at the facility, which includes workers being forced to labor 50 consecutive days at a time before getting time off, continual harassment from management, and a slave-like attendance policy and tier system. By means of such exploitation, the company raked in $1.4 billion in profit last year.

But the BCTGM was unable to gain any significant support despite spending more than five months campaigning. Democratic Party officials such as Bernie Sanders, "left-leaning" media outlets like the *Guardian* and organizations like More Perfect Union, funded by billionaire George Soros, lauded the unionization drive. The union created a private Facebook group to convince workers to join, but the number of members never reached 50 percent of the workforce at the facility.

In an effort at damage control, John Price, a 40-year veteran of the BCTGM and lead organizer in the campaign, is appealing to the federal government to toss out the vote. The union has filed unfair labor practice charges against Hershey that are currently under the review by the NLRB. The charges were filed on February 11.

The Biden administration's NLRB ruled that Amazon had violated labor laws during a union recognition vote last year, after the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) only garnered the support of 13 percent of the workers at the company's Bessemer, Alabama warehouse. The NLRB ordered a revote, which has just concluded, with ballots now being counted.

Hershey used every strategy in the playbook to keep the BCTGM out of the plant, even sacking a veteran manager to soothe tensions on the floor. It produced an anti-union website showcasing workers testifying to the "family-oriented" atmosphere and supposedly excellent wages and benefits. It also warned about the negative impact the union would have on the relations between workers and management.

Throughout the pandemic, however, Hershey forced to workers to risk their lives making non-essential products such as chocolate bars and Reese's peanut butter cups. Hershey made record profits in its non-union and unionized factories alike, including one under BCTGM Local 464 in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Hershey also intimidated workers and fired leaders in the BCTGM campaign while offering false promises to workers in exchange for a "no" vote. A veteran worker who was fired for voicing support for the BCTGM told the *World Socialist Web Site* "[Hershey] guaranteed no retaliation, an open-door policy with any HR department head, fair treatment (no favoritism), and that management and supervision would treat them with dignity and respect."

The worker continued, "I feel that the employees were intimidated and misled by the tactics that the company did to keep the union out. The employees know that I was terminated for my union support and that scared a lot of them. The employees believe the guarantees that were handed out to each of them."

The WSWS' efforts to reach the BCTGM to inquire if any efforts were being made to defend the worker who has fired had not been returned as of this writing. "They filed charges with the National Labor Board but not just on my behalf. They have not attempted to get my job back or help me find other employment," the worker said.

In another blow, amid record-breaking inflation and robbery at the gas pump, the company told workers they are not getting a "pay raise or overtime premium" for working long, backbreaking hours.

Jeff Beckman, a spokesperson for Hershey, said that the election will be certified next week by the NLRB, but also

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implied in his media statement that opposition to management is widespread. “Now that the vote is completed, we are refocusing our attention on bringing all of our employees together as ‘one Stuarts Draft’ and continuing to build the collaborative and cooperative culture that has made our plant great for 40 years.”

The methods employed by Hershey to block the unionization vote are blatantly anti-democratic. Workers have the right to vote on union recognition without intimidation and coercion by management. That being said, the failure of the BCTGM campaign is not entirely or even primarily due to management pressure on workers. In the 1930s, union organization drives had to overcome far more formidable obstacles.

Throughout the campaign at Hershey, BCTGM never advanced any demands that it pledged to fight for. This was not an accident or an oversight. It reflects the transformed role of unions, from defense organizations of workers to corporatist arms of management.

BCTGM bureaucrats rarely talked to, listened to, or advocated for the hundreds of workers at the plant who wanted actual change to the notorious attendance policy, the highly exploitative tier system, and the harassment by management who views the workforce as nothing but profit producing machines. *Reuters* in fact quotes an “anonymous worker” following the vote, who states, “forming a union was not about money and benefits but being treated with respect and dignity.”

The truth is, if workers had brought in the BCTGM, they would soon have found themselves in conflict with both management and the union itself.

The BCTGM’s record in recent months reveals its role as a tool of the corporations. A strike by 1,400 Kellogg’s workers last year was isolated for months, with workers receiving pittances of $105 a week in pay to support their struggle. An internal email leaked by Kellogg’s on the eve of the second contract vote boasted that the contract had “no gain overall…[n]o ratification bonus” and “most of the union’s negotiating committee is for this and plans to recommend it.”

What holds for the BCTGM is true for the entire US trade union movement. Decades of betrayals carried out by the BCTGM, the United Auto Workers, Steelworkers, Teamsters and other unions have demonstrated that these organizations are no longer able or willing to fight for the interests of workers.

In just the latest act of treachery, at the beginning of March, the United Steelworkers union (USW) agreed to deep cuts in real wages with Exxon, calling off a potential, financially-destabilizing strike by 30,000 oil workers a day after Russia launched its reactionary attack on Ukraine.

Precisely because of this record Democratic President Joseph Biden has made a push to promote the nationalist and pro-company unions. The BCTGM election at Hershey in Virginia follows several high-profile attempts to unionize workers at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama and at Starbucks locations around the country.

From the perspective of the U.S. ruling class, the BCTGM, Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), Teamsters and other organizations are a useful means to strangle workers’ militancy and block any effective strike action by rank-and-file workers. The need to suppress the class struggle takes on special urgency for the ruling class amid the ongoing supply chain crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the spiraling proxy war in Ukraine between US-NATO imperialism and Russia.

Opposition to the intolerable conditions at Hershey urgently needs to find a progressive outlet. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call on workers to organize rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-company unions and the big business Democratic and Republican parties. These committees should raise demands based on what workers want and need, not what management says it can accept. This should start with the full rehiring of all those fired for organizing in the workplace, a 40-hour five-day workweek, the abolition of the tier system, a large raise to compensate for decades of wage suppression, better benefits, and cost of living adjustments (COLA).

Workers in Virginia have already formed new organizations in opposition to both the company and the unions. At New River Valley’s Volvo Trucks plant, about a two-hour drive from Stuarts Draft, workers formed the Volvo Workers Rank and File Committee, which was essential in their leading a two-month strike against repeated sellout tentative agreements supported by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Hershey workers should also reach out to their brothers and sisters at other plants in Pennsylvania, Illinois and Tennessee, and internationally in Brazil, Canada, India, Mexico and elsewhere to link their struggle together and claw back the billions of dollars in profit Hershey has made during the pandemic.

Workers interested in taking up this fight should contact the WSWS.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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