

Strikebreakers brought in to replace FireKing workers in New Albany, Indiana

Kevin Reed
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Are you a FireKing worker? Contact us and tell us what you think about the ongoing strike and the move to bring in strikebreakers.

FireKing International LLC of New Albany, Indiana, announced on Tuesday that it was proceeding to hire scabs in response to a walkout by employees that began on May 9. The workers, members of Teamsters Local 89, went on strike to demand wage increases that keep up with inflation and to halt rising health care costs.

In a prepared statement, FireKing CEO Rick Mejia said, “Using the multiple levers at our disposal, we are quickly bringing FireKing back to full production and without an agreement with the Union leadership.”

Saying that FireKing management was “disappointed” that employees rejected a “competitive and generous offer,” Mejia said the company had “no choice but to hire permanent replacements to maintain production.” FireKing is a designer and manufacturer of fireproof storage cabinets and safes.

Of the 141 employees at FireKing, 86 are union members. The workers voted in favor of strike action prior to the start of contract negotiations. On April 27, the workers unanimously reaffirmed their commitment to fight the attacks of the company on their living standards in a second vote.

When FireKing management presented their “last and final offer” which included insufficient wage increases and health care premiums as high as \$13,700, the workers rejected it. When the previous contract expired on May 4, the company terminated employee benefits “in accordance with the terms of the parties’ now-expired collective bargaining agreement.” The workers went on strike at 3:30 a.m. five days later.

One worker told *News and Tribune* of Southern Indiana, “The health care that we’ve got here—the deductibles and stuff are so high that you can pay for

the insurance, but you can’t afford to use it when you go to the hospital or whatever.”

In addition to attempting to break the strike with scabs, the company has issued a cease-and-desist directive aimed at intimidating the picketing workers. The company said it is prepared to take “appropriate legal action to ensure the safe entry and exit for employees, commercial vehicles and all others having business with the company.”

According to a company press statement on May 5, the local union leadership pushed for FireKing to buy into a Teamsters-sponsored health insurance plan called TeamCare during the negotiations. In a statement from Local 89, the union said, “it went out of its way to adapt the plan to make it more palatable to the Company by allowing them to incorporate their management and non-union employees into it so that they wouldn’t have to deal with separate plans.”

On Wednesday, the national Teamsters union General President Sean M. O’Brien and General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman made an appearance on the picket line with FireKing workers. Along with their photo-op, the Teamsters officials gave a few sound bites about how the workers were fighting against “corporate greed.”

O’Brien and Zuckerman, along with the Local 89 leadership, are telling the FireKing workers to rely in an unfair labor practice (ULP) charge that the union has filed with the US National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) saying the company has failed to bargain in good faith. It is clear that nothing is being done to mobilize the strength of the local behind the 86 striking workers.

Far from it, the FireKing workers should be warned that the appearance of the leaders of the national Teamsters union leadership on their picket line is the

surest sign that their strike is being isolated and their struggle is being betrayed. The official labor unions function as the agents of the corporations and company owners and are blocking the unification of the struggles of workers across companies and industries in a common fight for jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions.

The fact that Teamsters officials placed the union-run health insurance program at the center of their negotiations with FireKing indicates the true big business orientation of the organization. It proves that the official “labor movement” in the US has been transformed into a corporate entity of its own that sees workers as pawns in its business dealings. For example, a publicly available 2020 annual report of TeamCare showed the insurance company run by the Teamsters union had assets of \$1 billion and took in revenues of \$400 million which included employer contributions of \$297 million and employee contributions of \$42 million.

Teamsters Local 89, which is based in Louisville, Kentucky, is itself a perfect example of the role of the unions. The local has nearly 16,000 members in manufacturing, construction, transportation, warehousing and retail industries in the Louisville area, yet none of these workers have been mobilized to support the strike by the FireKing workers. Aside from the appearance of a few local bureaucrats at the picket line to talk about the NLRB case, the strike is barely being reported by the local.

A publicly available analysis of the local’s finances shows that of the more than \$8 million taken in annually from membership dues, less than 1 percent has been spent on strike activity. Meanwhile, the union has dedicated significant resources to the election campaigns of favored politicians in the May 17 Kentucky primaries.

FireKing workers must take their struggle against FireKing out of the hands of the corrupt Teamsters union leadership by forming a rank-and-file committee. Through such a committee that is democratically controlled by workers themselves, an appeal can be issued to workers in manufacturing and other industries to join their fight. The committee should also draw up its own demands for a substantial wage increase and cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) to protect incomes from surging inflation, along with other improvements

to benefits and working conditions.



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