

Starbucks workers in Chicago strike against understaffing, low pay, unsafe conditions

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Are you a Starbucks worker? Fill out the form below to tell us about the conditions you face. All comments will be kept anonymous.

Starbucks workers in Chicago's northside neighborhood of Edgewater carried out a three-day strike this weekend to demand better staffing and working conditions. The baristas also spoke out against low pay with record levels of inflation and the unsafe conditions they faced during the pandemic.

The Edgewater store is one of two unionized stores in the city organized by Starbucks Workers United, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Over 288 of the more than 9,000 Starbucks stores nationwide have filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and 140 have voted to unionize so far.

Starbucks has threatened workers with retaliation at various stores for organizing, including recently at a facility in Clarksville, Indiana. Rubber mats that prevent slips and reduce joint stress were thrown out by management at that store.

“Our choices were, work or die”

“We’re striking because we are chronically understaffed,” one veteran Starbucks worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We have been going to management with this problem, asking them to help us with solutions, and it hasn’t gone anywhere. That’s why we are here.

“I’ve been with Starbucks for over 20 years, and I have worked for this store since it opened four years ago. In my tenure at Starbucks, I’ve seen it go from a cafe where you get that personal experience to much more of a boom-boom-boom, get ‘em get ‘em out, very impersonal. I come into work most days and immediately feel like I’m thrown to the wolves. I know my coworkers feel the same. I leave work feeling burned out.”

Starbucks made a profit of \$4.87 billion in 2021, a massive increase from the \$1.56 billion it made in 2020. Ken Johnson, the CEO of Starbucks, received a 41 percent pay raise in 2021, taking in \$20.4 million in total compensation. Other top executives took in an average of \$4-5 million or more in pay per year.

“I do not think we earn a livable wage either,” she added. “Ideally, if we could get between \$22-25 an hour that would be closer to livable in Chicago. My rent has gone up. In total, I’m going to pay \$500 more. My food stamps went down. I have three kids.

“My kids go to Chicago Public Schools,” she said. “But I can’t afford extras for them. If they want art classes or music classes, that’s just not doable. I’m barely making rent. I’m a single mother. I do date someone, but I’m primarily responsible for my children.

“We’re crammed in a two-bedroom apartment. Honestly, it’s hard for me to even talk about it without getting emotional. My oldest is 15 and deserves to have his own room, and I can’t give that to him,” she said

choking up.

“I live in Rogers Park, so the travel is not so bad. But with gas the way it is right now, I’ve considered biking. I haven’t been on a bicycle since I was a child. There’s the bus too, but the bus by me has been really unreliable. My kid takes it to school. The schedules are all over the place.

“It’s been radio silence from management. We’ve gotten support from other Starbucks employees though, which has been nice,” she added.

“All these workers that are saying ‘we’re not going to sit here and take it,’ that makes me happy. I’m so thrilled and heartened by this huge working class movement that gives me hope. These are the struggle times. We’re going to have to go through all this to get to the other side. I think it’s going to get worse before it gets better. But we’re together and that’s headed in the right direction.”

On the wave of strikes around the world, she commented, “I would say, ‘Power to you!’ We support you, and we have to all support each other, and we have to remain together and united. That’s the only way.

“In our country, they’re starting to chip away on our rights. It’s so disgusting. And the Supreme Court justices lied about their views. But from what I’m seeing, none of the Democrats are doing anything either. The people are mad and are protesting.

“These billionaires who have more money than they can spend in 10 lifetimes, they could have taken a small cut. Even the CEO of Starbucks. That would not affect their lives that much, but it would affect our lives greatly. And here we are—they’re scared of us! They brought it on themselves.

“At the beginning of the pandemic when the phrase ‘We’re all in this together’ [started], that sounded nice,” she said of the company. “But then Starbucks opened up again. They closed for a month. We were told, ‘Here’s your choice. You can go back to work with masses of people in a pandemic, or be unemployed.’ Oh, we’re not really in it together. The CEO is not worried about how he pays rent. For us our choices were work or die...”

“I got COVID before the vaccines,” she added. “It was the worst illness I had in my life. It took me out for a couple weeks. I was in bed for two weeks. Once I got back up, it took me another month before I was almost normal.

“My boyfriend has Long COVID. He’s dealing with neurological symptoms. He has tinnitus, some of the worst days he wanted to just be asleep. And now he’s having nerve pain throughout and randomly. He shakes and twitches. From time to time he also has a foggy head. He’s applied for Social Security Disability. It’s been about six months. He’s still waiting. He can’t work. He’s lost his ability to work. He’s a performer, but he can’t trust his body or his mind to be sharp enough.”

“Both of the times I got COVID were through work”

“Our store manager didn’t even try to open the store at all,” another worker said of the strike. “Our district manager hasn’t been by. Kind of radio silence so far. We’re still in the waiting game. We started our strike Friday at the open. We honestly thought they were going to try to open the store today. We were surprised they didn’t.

“Our closest store on Bryn Mawr Avenue is open. Some of the workers there are here now. They’re the other union store in the district. They support us and encourage what we are doing.

“I’ve been here since this store opened in 2018. Right now, the thing we’re technically striking against is Starbucks’ nationwide hour cuts. We’re basically working on skeleton crews.

“At first I was proud of the way Starbucks responded to the pandemic,” the striking barista added. “When we came to work, they said they would offer us protection with the pandemic, and gradually that whittled away. If we were even potentially exposed to COVID, everyone was initially given 14 days leave. Then over time, if we tested positive for COVID, we got 10 days. Then five days. And then it’s like unless you actually test positive, even if you’re next to someone who does, you don’t get off at all. And if you take off you don’t get paid leave.

“Also, the mask requirements, they took it away, and then they put it back again. So, lots of inconsistency from Starbucks corporate. A lot of the protections they offered us in the beginning were taken away. I’m a disabled worker and immunocompromised. I’m actually on medical leave because of flare-ups. Seeing Starbucks not responding and not protecting our safety was a reason why we wanted to unionize as well.

“A big part of what I’m dealing with is POTS, postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, which is exacerbated by Long COVID. When I got COVID working here, I’ve faced the effects of that pretty much since I got it in April 2021, when I was half vaccinated. Then I got the Omicron variant in 2022 again.

“Both of the times I was exposed to COVID were through work. I was wearing a mask, but I believe it was when customers stopped wearing masks the second time. The first time I got COVID, I got 14 days paid leave and we had to shut down the entire store. The second time I got COVID, I got five days off and nobody else did. It kind of shows how Starbucks started off with protections and then gradually all the promises they made didn’t matter anymore. And all of the pay raises and extra precautions went away, we noticed.

“The CDC decision on five days to return to work doesn’t make any sense,” the worker noted. “Next thing they’re going to say, ‘Go get a medicine ball and you’ll be fine.’

“A common cold now knocks out my immune system more than it normally used to. After five days you’re still exhausted. Because we’re so understaffed right now, Starbucks workers are encouraged to work while sick, which is a dangerous thing during the pandemic. There’s the pressure because we don’t have the coverage on the floor. Even if we have symptoms, they don’t let us go home, which violates all food and safety policies. If not death, you could also get Long COVID and other chronic diseases, like kidney diseases and Crohn’s and fibromyalgia.

“They’re putting us at risk on the front lines when we went from being ‘essential’ to being less than human food service workers again. We went from being told ‘Thank you’ every day to being understaffed now.

“Gas prices are skyrocketing here. I drive everywhere. The gas prices have been very damaging. Whether I go to doctor’s appointments or pick up my partner from work, it requires gas. I’m also on disability leave right now, so my pay is 66 percent of what it normally is. With prices going up as much as they are and with my pay being as low as it is, it just isn’t cutting it. We’re not getting paid enough to live under the inflation we’re facing, and there’s other countries facing even worse inflation.

“With rents going up, rent prices are going up, gas prices are going, grocery prices are going up, but our pay isn’t going up. Starbucks’ pay is \$15 minimum everywhere. The barista pay of \$15.50 in Chicago isn’t

enough. In a city like Chicago you need way more than that with a full-time schedule.

“For me, car payment, bills, gas, groceries, it all stacks up, medical payments, groceries. I currently pay my Starbucks health benefits out of pocket. Starbucks isn’t offering a reasonable raise. I’m swimming in medical debt as well. Because I’m on medical leave, I have to pay my benefits out of pocket. So with my copays that I have to pay for cardiologists, neurologists and my general physician and pay my Starbucks benefits, it’s been daunting. When I get back, I’ll have a lot of credit card debt. Budgeting is tough lately.”

“A coordinated strike across the country would be wonderful”

“Business is picking up, and the floors have been staffed worse and worse,” said another worker who has worked at Starbucks for eight years. “That’s fewer and fewer partners to keep up with the pace of business and the increasing rate of customers. They are doing the work of two or three partners each, people are missing breaks, people are not able to keep up with sanitary regulations like changing the sanitary fluids every hour, the quality of the drinks is falling, and people are getting burned out and dread coming to work.”

“Roughly 20 work in this store right now,” he added. “It’s a little lower because some college students went out of town. In the evening, afternoon to evening, there’s maybe three to four people on the floor. We have one drive-thru, we have two bars, we have front, oven, mobile orders like Uber Eats, there are several different avenues where orders are coming in. People are ordering ahead, people come through the drive-thru. The pace is frantic.

“There are days we are able to keep up with the rate of business, but when it slows down, you realize you’ve done none of your evening tasks. As a closer, we’ve had to close late. Our store closes at 9:30 p.m., and we’ve walked out as late as 10:15 p.m. We could walk out at the time we need to, but there’s certain tasks that need to be done, and there’s certain tasks that don’t get finished. The people in the morning get completely screwed. We care about each other, and we don’t want to set each other up for failure.

“The pandemic showed cracks in the facade,” he said of the erosion of safety measures by the company. “We got an extra \$3 an hour initially, but they pulled back everything. The catastrophe pay raise was pulled back. Different protections were loosened. Our store can’t guarantee even six feet of social distancing.

“As the pandemic wore on, they just decided it’s over. But it’s not over. The company’s made great profits, raised prices, but our wages have stagnated, and they’re lower than the rate of inflation. It’s a paycut by extension every year.

“A coordinated strike across the country would be wonderful,” he said. “This doesn’t work without collaboration. The more united people are, the stronger we are. We’d need the support of the working class as a whole, and we’ve been getting support,” he said as cars drove by honking in support.



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