

Workers at Coca-Cola distribution plant in Philadelphia launch strike action

Ray Coleman, Nick Barrickman
18 April 2023

Are you a striking Coca-Cola distribution worker? Tell us what you're fighting for by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Sunday, about 400 Coca-Cola workers at a bottling and distribution plant in Philadelphia's Juniata Park neighborhood went on strike against the multinational beverage corporation. Workers at the facility help bottle and deliver popular drinks such as Coke, Monster energy drinks, Dasani, Powerade, and others.

Members of the Teamsters Local 830 voted down a contract negotiated between the union and Liberty Coca-Cola, the largest bottling plant and distributor in the tri-state region of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. The bargaining unit includes drivers, warehouse workers and production staff. Members unanimously authorized the strike after voting down the company's offer five to one.

Compensation was one of the major issues in contract negotiations. As with other sections of the working class, workers at the bottling and distribution facility have suffered through skyrocketing inflation over the last two years.

Health and retirement benefits were also one of the central issues at stake. Workers were asking for the option to join their local union's health plan rather than the more expensive Aetna health plan offered by Liberty Coca-Cola. They also wanted the company to increase 401(k) contributions.

Retirement contributions were also in focus during the last contract negotiations with Liberty in 2018. At the time, the company claimed Philadelphia's "soda tax" made cuts to retirement benefits necessary, citing a study by the University of Pennsylvania Medical School finding the tax produced a 38.9 percent drop in purchases of sweetened drinks. At the time, the plant

employed about 600 workers.

The last time Local 830 members went on strike at this location in Philadelphia was in 2004, for two weeks. Liberty Coca-Cola filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board against Local 830, accusing it of unfair labor practices.

Following the latest negotiations, which extended for 18 sessions of bargaining, Liberty Coca-Cola released a statement: "While Daniel Grace, secretary-treasurer for the union, and other national and local leadership endorsed the contract, unfortunately, the Local 830 members voted to reject the last, best offer and agreed to strike effective April 16."

Grace disputed this characterization, telling Quartz the claim he "endorsed" the latest offer was "utterly disingenuous and misleading." Grace said, "The document they referenced in their statement was a simple acknowledgement that I agreed to take the proposal to my membership for a vote. They knew that to be the case. It was absolutely not an acceptance of their offer."

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Grace declined to publicly state the Teamsters' wage demands, only declaring their desire to combat the impact of "runaway inflation."

Last year, Coca-Cola had gross profits of \$25 billion, a 7.32 percent increase from the \$23.3 billion in gross profits in 2021. Zippia, a career expert website, estimates Liberty Coca-Cola had \$1.3 billion in revenue in 2022. For the facility's 3,000 employees, this translated to about \$440,163 per worker.

The average yearly pay for warehouse workers can range between \$30,000 and \$40,000. According to GlassDoor.com, an order picker at Liberty Coca-Cola makes between \$38,000 and \$40,000. Delivery drivers make \$40,417 on average.

The strike is part of a growing wave of worker discontent against management efforts to impose the impact of the economic crisis on the workforce. Workers affiliated with the Teamsters are seeking to break the cycle of corporate exploitation which they have faced due to consecutive concessionary contracts agreed to by the union and management.

The Teamsters' leadership under General President Sean O'Brien has worked diligently with the US government nationally to block the working class from using its strength in strikes which would threaten the global position of the American economy and its efforts to mobilize its resources to confront both Russia and China militarily.

In December, the Teamster-affiliated Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen collaborated with the Biden White House to illegalize a strike on the railroads which would have threatened the US economy and its war drive.

Teamsters Local 773 workers went on strike in December 2021 for nearly six weeks against Coca-Cola in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, about an hour away from Philadelphia. Local 733 was asking for a 60 cent (\$0.60) hourly raise for members during bargaining.

In 2022, beer distributors affiliated with Local 830 in Philadelphia launched a strike against their employers amid rampant inflation and grueling work hours. That strike was called off suddenly when it threatened the revenues of entertainment venues and pubs during the lucrative July 4 holiday.

The current strike is concurrent with contract negotiations between roughly 340,000 United Parcel Service workers and the massive logistics company. Workers are eager to claw back wages and work conditions which were conceded by the Teamsters bureaucracy during the last contract negotiations in 2018.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact