

Teamsters bureaucracy blocks strike by Coca-Cola workers in West Virginia

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Are you a Coca-Cola, Sysco or UPS worker? Fill out the form below to tell us what you think about the strike delay. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

In a last minute move, the Teamsters union canceled a strike by 100 Coca-Cola workers in the Charleston Logan areas in West Virginia.

The workers had voted unanimously to strike against the multi-billion dollar soft drink maker after the company demanded workers accept a contract that would cut pay and benefits and eliminate many of their jobs. The workers deliver Coca-Cola products to the stores in the Charleston and Logan, West Virginia areas. Workers at the companies other locations throughout the state are covered by separate contracts, but would no doubt want to join in the strike.

In talks Tuesday, Coca-Cola made no concessions to the union, and workers were fully prepared to go on the picket lines the next morning. But Ken Hall, President of Teamsters Local 175, ordered drivers to report to work early Wednesday morning, even though their contract had expired Tuesday night. Hall's pitiful reason for canceling the strike was that Coca-Cola's customers were going to speak with the company and ask them not to go through with the planned job cuts.

In reality, the company's customers are in talks with them about how to cut jobs and save money. Coca-Cola has reached a side agreement with one of its major customers, Sheetz, a regional gas stations and convenience store chain, for Sheetz to use their own trucks and drivers to distribute Coca-Cola products from their distribution centers, bypassing Coca-Cola's own drivers.

Sheetz, with a revenue of over \$7 billion, operates convenience stores and gas stations throughout West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and neighboring states. The company is notorious for the exploitation of its

workforce. Varying somewhat by location, starting wages for store employees range from \$13 to \$16 an hour. Delivery drivers make between \$27 and \$32 an hour, while a fuel driver with a CDL, tanker and hazmat certification and four years of experience will make \$37 an hour.

Reportedly, Sheetz has threatened Coca-Cola that the company would stop selling their products if Coca-Cola didn't agree to allow them to deliver their own products. In reality, both companies probably favored the deal as a way to cut costs, with Coca-Cola seeing it as a way to set a precedent for cutting jobs and wages.

In announcing the last minute cancellation of their strike, Hall set no strike deadline and instead said that they would wait a few days. The union has also not published any demands from the members.

Hall and the rest of the Teamsters union bureaucracy are seeking to suppress and isolate workers. The union has not published any announcement about the struggle on either the local or international union websites.

Over the past year, the Teamsters bureaucracy has been working to put out a growing strike movement by drivers in the food service sector. Earlier this month, about 400 Coca-Cola workers at a bottling and distribution plant in Philadelphia went on strike for better wages and benefits. The Teamsters worked to isolate and betray that struggle.

The Teamsters also shut down a two-week strike by Sysco drivers in Indianapolis, Indiana and Louisville, Kentucky. That strike won wide support from Sysco drivers throughout the country. Sympathy pickets were set up in Los Angeles and San Francisco, California; Bloomington, Indiana; and Seattle, Washington, involving over 1,000 workers, and were still growing when the Teamsters shut the strike down. Late last year, the Teamsters shut down strikes by Sysco workers

in Syracuse, New York and Boston, Massachusetts over low wages and benefit cuts.

Expressing the fear that any strike could get out of hand, Hall told the West Virginia *Metro News* that the strike could spread to other parts of West Virginia and Ohio. “This could turn into something very large and it is not something that I want to happen,” Hall told *Metro News*.

The involvement of Ken Hall is significant because he was formerly the second-most powerful official in the entire International Brotherhood of Teamsters, when he served as General Secretary Treasurer under James Hoffa, Jr. A notorious figure in the Hoffa “old guard” faction of the bureaucracy, Hall was charged for obstruction of justice by the FBI in early 2017 for his withholding and destruction of tens of thousands of documents and emails from an investigation into union embezzlement and other corruption charges.

Although Hall was faced with expulsion from the union, the case was settled out of court and Hall only retired from his position as Secretary Treasurer in early 2022, when he was replaced by Fred Zuckerman following a union general election.

Although the current administration of General President Sean O’Brien was promoted as a break with the corruption of the Hoffa faction of the Teamsters, the IBT has not said a word about the deliberate strikebreaking in Local 175 by its former number two officer. This is because the new administration supports it.

O’Brien occasionally indulges in militant-sounding rhetoric, buttressed by support from the pseudo-left Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which O’Brien brought into top posts following his election. In reality, O’Brien is working carefully with management and the White House at UPS to block a strike by nearly 350,000 workers before their contract expires at the end of July. He played an instrumental role in the Biden administration’s campaign last year to block a national rail strike, which was eventually achieved through a ban imposed by Congress.

As the confrontation between hundreds of thousands of UPS workers and the Teamsters union bureaucracy is on the agenda, and the bureaucrats around O’Brien do not want to be distracted by strikes at Sysco and Coca-Cola.

Workers in the logistics industry are in a very

powerful position. However, they, like workers in auto, health care and education, face a corrupt and rotten union apparatus which is working with the companies and seeking to sabotage their struggle. To fight for what they need, they must organize themselves independently of the union apparatus.



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