Teamsters seek to isolate Philadelphia Coca Cola workers as strike approaches one month

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A strike by over 400 workers at the Liberty Coca-Cola bottling plant in Philadelphia enters its fourth week on Sunday as workers there fight for better pay and benefits. On April 30, workers overwhelmingly rejected the company's second contract offer by a four-to-one margin.

In statement following the second defeat of a tentative agreemen,t Local 830 Secretary-Treasurer Daniel Grace wrote, "Despite a brief resumption of contractual negotiations with Liberty Coca-Cola ... a resolution is still not at hand. Teamsters Local 830 members remain committed to negotiating with Liberty Coca-Cola on a fair new contract. Until that happens, however, we will remain on the picket line as our strike enters its third week." The Local 830 bargaining unit includes drivers, warehouse workers, and production staff.

Details of the first and second contract votes are not publicly available. The company originally said the first offer was its best and final one. Liberty Coca-Cola claimed both contracts had "the highest wage increases in Coca-Cola/Teamsters Local 830's history," plus a "generous" benefits package. According to the company, the average employee makes $79,000 currently and the first offer included a 17 percent wage increase over five years.

Local 830, however, called the company's claim "a flat-out lie." Grace said in a statement that as for the claim that workers at Liberty Coca-Cola make $79,000 on average, "that's simply not true. Our members would have to work a minimum of 20 hours of overtime a week to reach those compensation levels."

Rania Major, a local attorney who is running for a municipal court judge position, posted on Facebook the company offered only "a $0.05 cent raise over 5 years, took away the signing bonus and said they would hire non-union."

The strike began on April 16, the day after their last contract expired. Local members had decisively voted down the first tentative agreement and authorized the union to call a strike by a resounding margin. Workers are unhappy with the private health plan offered through Aetna and want higher employer contributions to 401(k) retirement plans, in addition to wage gains to keep pace with rising living costs.

The company has brought in scabs and rented Penske trucks to continue deliveries. This was part of what it calls its "active contingency plan." The company has also been paying to have local sheriffs onsite to ensure picket lines do not obstruct operations at the facility and that business continues uninterrupted out of the plant in Juniata Park.

While Liberty Coca-Cola, the largest bottling plant and distributor of Coca-Cola beverages in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, has resorted to strong-arming its workers, the Teamsters have largely isolated their own members, sabotaging an effective fight for a decent contract.

Rather than seek to mobilize the broader working class to back the strike, Local 830 has issued impotent appeals to Democratic Party officials and local businesses.

In the second week of the strike, the local initiated a leafleting campaign at Wawa and Penn Relay convenience stores in the Philadelphia area, encouraging customers to boycott Coca-Cola products in solidarity with striking workers. Last week, Philadelphia mayoral candidate Jeff Brown, who owns over a dozen ShopRite grocery stores in Philadelphia, declared at a campaign rally his stores will stop carrying Coca-Cola products for the duration of the strike.

In a revealing statement demonstrating the incestuous relations that exist between the Democratic Party, big business and the union apparatus, Brown declared last week that he and the Teamsters leaders at Local 830 “worked side by side for a long time, usually side by side with the owners of the beverage businesses.” Brown referred to Local 830’s secretary-treasurer Grace as “his longtime friend,” according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

For his part, Grace has said he is “stunned and incredibly disappointed in the anti-union stance taken by Liberty Coca-Cola co-owner Fran McGorry, a man I’ve known since childhood and considered a friend.” Grace was “one of the first” people McGorry called to help lead a joint effort by “the entire regional beverage industry” against Philadelphia’s soda tax, implemented in 2017, which led to job cuts at Liberty Coca-Cola.

While the trio of “good friends” in the offices of Local 830, Liberty Coke and ShopRite have been getting along famously, conditions at the beverage distributor have sharply deteriorated.

One review featured on Indeed.com by a driver-merchandiser says, “They’ll give you a workload with 14 stops to deliver to all these customer stores by yourself and expect you to finish everything. Terrible equipment.” On Glassdoor, one driver-merchandiser wrote, “Hard work. Mandatory overtime. Routes that are supposed to be a 2-man route by yourself. Trucks are old.” Still another states: “Long hours, union sucks, management is the worse [sic] it’s been [in] years. A lot of employees have FMLA over 50%. No overall retirement.”

Instead of mobilizing other Teamsters members, the union is shutting down strikes in the same industry. A potential strike among about 100 workers in West Virginia at Coca-Cola Consolidated, the largest bottler in the country, was blocked by Teamsters Local 175. The local has kept workers on the job without a contract despite a unanimous strike authorization by members. The local’s president, Ken Hall, said the threatened strike in West Virginia could have become “something very large and it is not something that I want to happen.”

The isolation of the Philadelphia Coca Cola strike is not simply a local union policy but reflects the policy of the Teamsters union more broadly. Teamster President Sean O’Brien has met regularly with the White House to update President Biden about the progress of negotiations for the nearly 350,000 Teamsters working at the United Parcel Service whose contract ends in July.

O’Brien is continuing the role he played in selling out the railroad workers late last year and collaborating with the White House in imposing a management-dictated agreement stripping workers of their right to strike.

To win their demands, workers at Liberty Coke must organize independently of the pro-management Teamsters apparatus by organizing a rank-and-file committee to conduct their strike. This committee, democratically run by workers themselves can formulate demands, inform rank-and-file workers and reach out to other Teamster drivers as well as other sections of workers to engage in coordinated struggles. Workers who want more information or would like to share their experiences should contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.