Citing “lack of service to customers,” Teamsters bureaucrats shut down Coca-Cola strike in West Virginia

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10 May 2023

Are you a Coca-Cola delivery driver, or a member of the Teamsters union? Tell us what you think about the calling off of the strike in West Virginia by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A strike by 100 Coca-Cola warehouse workers and truck drivers in West Virginia is being shut down by the Teamsters bureaucracy. The strike began Tuesday morning, after weeks of delays, but Local 175 President Ken Hall announced they would end the pickets today.

Pickets had been set up at Coca-Cola’s facilities in the state capital of Charleston, in Logan, Clarksburg, Parkersburg and Bluefield. The workers distribute Coca-Cola products to stores, restaurants and gas stations. Another 100 workers at other Coca-Cola facilities throughout the state are honoring the strike. Workers at facilities in Beckley, Morgantown and Elkins are non-union.

Coca-Cola was trying to keep deliveries going using management and non-union workers as scabs. The company is also allowing customers to pick up products from their distribution centers. However, this had only limited success. Only 15 percent of scheduled deliveries went out during the strike, according to a press release by the Teamsters.

Absurdly, Hall cited the *success* of the strike in shutting down deliveries as the reason for suspending the strike. “Our members are concerned about their customers not receiving service,” he claimed Wednesday evening. “They’re only servicing their larger customers like Kroger and Walmart. Their convenience stores and all of their other business—the haven’t made one attempt in two days to service them.”

In other words, the Teamsters bureaucracy are acting as conscious strikebreakers, shutting down pickets precisely because of their powerful impact.

Workers are angry that Coca-Cola is seeking two major changes to their contract which would mean the loss of jobs. The company’s final offer would also mean an effective wage cut as it would not keep pace with inflation.

Coca-Cola is also seeking to hire non-union employees to deliver and fill up syrup for fountain machines in restaurants, hospitals and other institutions. It recently gave its non-union weekend employees a $4 an hour pay raise, while not offering that much to the Teamsters members in the entire three-year contract.

Workers had been working without a contract since last month after they voted down the company’s “last, best and final offer” on April 23 and voted unanimously to strike. They were originally set to strike on April 26, until the Teamsters bureaucrats canceled the strike at the last second, claiming that Coca-Cola’s customers were going to speak with the company to avert a strike.

In reality, the soda giant is working with its customers to potentially eliminate delivery jobs entirely. Coca-Cola has reached a side agreement with Sheetz, a regional chain of gas stations and convenience stores, that would allow it to receive Coke products using their own distribution system, by passing Coca-Cola’s own workers.

Sheetz has threatened to stop selling Coke products if the company didn’t agree to allow them to deliver their own products. In reality, both companies favor 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. Both Sheetz and Coca-Cola are hoping to reach a similar agreement for Ohio, where Coca-Cola employs about 1,000 drivers and warehouse workers.

While workers were determined and carried out spirited early morning picketing the first day of the strike, the Teamsters bureaucracy sought to isolate them and wrap up the strike as soon as possible, fearing that the struggle could spread to Coca-Cola drivers around the country.

Ken Hall, President of Local 175 and the former general secretary treasurer of the entire international union under previous President James Hoffa Jr., held off calling the strike until Teamsters Local 830 was able to push through a sellout contract for 400 striking Coke workers in the Philadelphia area. That contract was rammed through in voting which took place one day after it was announced, with workers not given copies of the contract. Balloting took place in part on a “voting bus” sent directly to the picket line and staffed by international reps, raising serious questions about the legitimacy of the vote.

Over the past several months, truck drivers at food service company Sysco launched a strike in Boston and Syracuse. A two-week strike by Sysco drivers in Indianapolis, Indiana and Louisville, Kentucky, 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.

Hall told the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* that the strike was over grievances only, and not the contract. “Some of them are having supervisors do work that should be union work, depriving them of hours,” Hall told the *Gazette*. “There are other issues. I’m not going into all of them right now.” Hall, told the paper that workers would return to work if their grievances were addressed, even absent a contract. In the end, Local 175 shut down the strike without even having met that requirement.

Above all, the Teamsters bureaucracy fears the struggle of food service workers would become united with the upcoming contract of 340,000 drivers at United Parcel Service whose contract expires on July 31.

As the General Secretary-Treasurer of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters for 10 years before stepping down last year, Hall accumulated a lengthy record of corruption and betrayals. He was lead negotiator for the national UPS contracts in 1997, 2002, 2008 and 2013, during which the Teamsters and UPS pushed through massive concessions and speedup on the drivers and warehouse workers. He was also charged by the FBI in 2017 for obstruction for refusing to release emails relating to a corruption investigation. Those charges were later settled out of court, and Hall was allowed to keep his job.

Hall is continuing this record of betrayal as Local 175 president. The financial records of Local 175 shows that the union spends hundreds of thousands of dollars on union salaries, union overhead and administration while spending next to nothing on strike pay.

The current administration of General President Sean O’Brien, which touts itself a break from the previous administration, has not said a word about the betrayal of the Coca-Cola strikers. This is because the new administration supports it. In reality, O’Brien himself was a top Hoffa ally and vicious faction fighter until he broke publicly with his mentor in 2018 to prepare the ground for his own election campaign.

Despite the fact that delivery drivers are in a powerful position, their fight is being sabotaged by a corrupt and rotten union apparatus which is working with the companies. To fight for what they need, they must organize rank-and-file committees independently of the union apparatus that will take up the fight against both management and their lackeys in the union bureaucracy.

By organizing themselves independently, and by uniting with rank-and-file workers at Coca-Cola and other workplaces around the country, workers can develop the power to countermand scab order such as Local 175’s decision to shut down the pickets and organize the fight themselves.

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