

Wisconsin: Leinenkugel and New Dairy Select Milk workers strike to win back concessions surrendered by Teamsters

George Gallanis
6 August 2023

Two strikes are ongoing in Wisconsin amidst the growth of strikes and protests around the United States and internationally.

Some 40 workers at the Chippewa Falls-based Leinenkugel's Brewery in northwestern Wisconsin are continuing a strike, their first since 1985, alongside more than a dozen New Dairy Select Milk workers in De Pere, in eastern Wisconsin outside Green Bay. Both sections of striking workers are part of Teamsters Union Local 662.

Leinenkugel's workers went on strike on July 10 after workers voted to reject the company's "last, best and final offer." Over 98 percent of workers voted to authorize a strike, demanding improvements in pay to offset inflation. According to the Teamsters, the brewery's entry-level wages are just \$19 an hour.

Tom Strickland, secretary-treasurer of Local 662, said the company and union last met on Tuesday, with no agreement reached with Leinenkugel's parent company, Molson Coors.

Management has fortified the brewery with barriers and security guards, while outside strikers are holding signs that say "Stop the war on workers," "On Strike" and "End Corporate Greed." Community members have shown their support for the strike, honking as they pass by and donating food. Some local bars are even boycotting Molson Coors products.

A statement from Adam Collins, Molson Coors' Chief Communications and Corporate Affairs Officer, read, "We've extended a competitive proposal that surpasses the local-market compensation for comparable union roles, and notwithstanding the circumstances, we anticipate a solution that is mutually beneficial."

There is more than enough money to meet all of the striking workers' demands. In February, Molson Coors, a multi-national beverage behemoth, revealed that its net sales increased last year to \$10.7 billion from the previous year's figure of \$10.27 billion.

However, the Teamsters bureaucracy, responsible for previous sellout contracts, is doing everything possible to end the strike and force through another pro-company agreement.

Across the state, meanwhile, over a dozen New Dairy Select Milk workers in De Pere have been on strike since July 10. Workers are striking against the company's plans to move workers to a new health plan that raises out-of-pocket costs.

The plant was originally owned by Dean Foods before it was bought out by Borden Dairy, the parent of New Daily Select Milk, after it declared bankruptcy in 2020. In 2022, Borden Dairy's annual revenue was \$1.2 billion.

Erick Seidl, a Local 662 steward and an employee at the plant for 24 years, told the *Green Bay Gazette* that many workers lost benefits and pensions were cut when the bankruptcy occurred. "We made those concessions then, and that must be taken into account now," Seidl noted.

The actions of the Teamsters underscore the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* for workers to form rank-and-file committees independent from the union apparatus to take these strikes into their own hands, and create direct lines of communication between the two groups of striking workers.

Strikers should reach out to other sections of workers as well for support, including United Parcel Service

(UPS) workers, who are voting on a sellout contract agreed to by the Teamsters bureaucracy, along with striking actors and writers. Workers should also contact UPM Blandin paper mill workers across the state line in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, who have been on strike since July 6, and are also members of the Teamsters.

Instead of seeking to mobilize the broadest support for both these struggles, the Teamsters have limited their efforts to soliciting worthless professions of support from the Democratic Party. In a Facebook post the Democratic Party of Chippewa County stated, “This strike, similar to numerous labor strikes across the US, has hit close to home. It’s imperative we offer our support.”

Workers should put no faith in such empty “support,” which in fact serves only to mask the fact that the Teamsters leadership is doing everything they can to shut the strike down. The greatest fear of the union leadership and the Democratic Party is that the stand by Leinenkugel’s workers could spark a broader fight among workers in Wisconsin and nationally.

In relation to the New Dairy Select Milk strike, Seidl said that although the new owners agreed to minor salary increases annually, they do not keep up with inflation, and the newly proposed contract features a healthcare plan that would eat away at their pay.

According to Seidl, the company rejected the union’s plan for an improved healthcare plan. “It would’ve been cost-saving for them and better for us,” he explained. “But they responded with an inferior proposal.”

Strickland, secretary and treasurer of Teamsters Local 662, said that following the launch of the strike, management responded with an even worse proposal.

“On Friday (July 7), the company presented the union with a final offer, but they made a move in the wrong direction,” said Strickland. “The concessions stand is closed,” he added, a tacit admission that the “concessions stand” was open for a long time. While union representatives speak of their so-called fights with the companies, workers are trying to overturn the very concessions that the unions agreed to.

Leinenkugel’s workers previously voted down a concessionary contract accepted by Local 662. Meanwhile, the dairy plant workers were forced to make concessions during the transition from Deans and are now attempting to win back what they lost.

Likewise at UPS, the Teamsters hailed a supposedly historic agreement that in fact is another concessions contract. After several months of a contrived “strike-ready campaign,” workers were suddenly presented with a preliminary agreement that failed to address any of their demands. The deal proposes the creation of a second tier of lower-paid part-time employees, halts pension contributions for workers in the Western US, provides wage increases that are less than the inflation rate, and continues to support Uber-like personal vehicle driver arrangements, among other sell-out provisions.

These bitter experiences should serve as lessons for workers: if the struggle is left in the hands of the Teamsters apparatus their strikes will be sabotaged and sold out. Workers should therefore follow the lead of the UPS rank-and-file committee and create their own committees to expand their struggle and appeal for the broadest possible support among workers everywhere.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact