UFCW rushes vote by Hormel meatpacking workers on tentative agreement

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Work in the meatpacking industry? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us what your working conditions are like and what you are fighting for.

Last Thursday, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and Hormel Food Corp. announced a tentative agreement on a four-year contract for plants in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Georgia. Amidst stubbornly hight inflation levels and grueling working conditions, workers are fighting for better pay, pensions and healthcare.

The announcement comes after 1,700 Hormel workers in Austin, Minnesota, members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 663, the largest of the Hormel plants in the region, overwhelmingly voted to reject a four-year contract proposal September 15, following two months of talks.

Facing massive rank-and-file opposition to the deal, which met none of the workers' demands, the union called on workers to vote the agreement down, but still refused to call a strike.

Local 663 leaders are now gushing over the latest tentative agreement, stating on the union website, "We unanimously recommend this tentative agreement to our fellow union members at Hormel. We are grateful for the strength our coworkers showed throughout this bargaining process to keep our voices heard. When we show up for each other, we see each other, and only together will we succeed because we are a union."

The union has not released a single word from the new agreement. Instead, it will be presented to workers on Sunday, likely as carefully curated 'highlights,' forcing workers to vote on it the following Monday.

Why should workers be given less than a day to study a contract that determines the next four years of their lives?

On principle, Hormel workers should reject this contract, given the attempt by the UFCW to rush them into accepting this deal. That workers previously rejected a worthless agreement one month ago, and the union has deprived workers of the slightest detail on the latest contract offer, must be seen with the greatest suspicion.

The campaign for a "no" vote should be linked with the creation of rank-and-file committees at every Hormel plant. Lines of communication between shifts, different sections of workers, and plants must be made, to place contract talks into workers' hands.

The union admitted its previous final offer to Hormel included wage increases of $6.25 by September 2025, and the previous known proposal from Hormel in August contained a raise of $2.15 over the next four years. Both offers fell far below current inflation levels.

Such a miserable offer is a provocation given the enormous wealth that Hormel controls. A Fortune 500 global branded food company, Hormel announced in August in their 2023 third quarter fiscal report net sales of $3.0 billion, with Hormel's CEO Jim Snee stating, "Our third quarter results reflect the strength of our leading brands, the value of our balanced business model and our team's commitment to improving our performance," and "we grew volume across all our segments, delivered adjusted net earnings per share in line with last year and made further progress addressing the near-term challenges impacting the business."

Last year, Snee said, "We achieved all-time record sales and double-digit profit growth in fiscal 2022," and, "In the fourth quarter, our team delivered diluted earnings per share comparable with record results last year, which included an additional week of sales."

In other words, Hormel paid shareholders to the tune

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of millions.

Meanwhile, according to the Star Tribune, Snee received a total compensation of $7,489,188 last year. The unfortunate Snee saw his compensation dip from $7.7 million to just under $7.5 million from the prior year.

The history of the UFCW is littered with betrayals and sellout contracts. Earlier this year, Minnesota Lund's grocery chain workers were sent back to work by the union with an agreement that met none of the workers' demands.

During the pandemic meatpacking workers were designated "essential workers." The UFCW criminally worked with companies to keep meat plants open, fanning the spread of COVID-19 among workers, leading to widespread sickness and death. The pandemic only exacerbated what already is a dangerous, indeed deadly, job. A recent report from the National Employment Law Project based on figures from the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration states that an average of 27 packing industry workers per day suffer amputation or hospitalization.

As the WSWS previously noted, workers must turn to history to understand the brutal conditions meatpacking workers face. The sabotage of the Hormel strike of 1985-86 by the UFCW bureaucracy paved the way for the deterioration of the pay and conditions of meatpacking workers. As the WSWS wrote, "The defeat of the Hormel workers in 1986 cleared the decks for a brutal counteroffensive against all the gains workers had made in a century of struggle, dating back to before Upton Sinclair's famous exposé of the industry, *The Jungle*."

The times, however, have changed. Hormel workers are not alone in their struggle to improve their lives through better pay, safer working conditions and better healthcare, and by asserting democratic control over their workplaces. They join a growing rebellion by workers in the US and internationally. After voting by 97 percent to go on strike, Big Three autoworkers are in the midst of contract talks and this week were 4,000 Mack Trucks workers have joined the picket lines. 75,000 Kaiser Permanente workers took part last week in the largest healthcare strike in US history.

Workers not only face a fight against ruthless employers, but pro-corporate trade union bureaucracies that time and time again intervene to block or sabotage struggles. To win their fight workers should examine the bitter lessons of the 1985-1986 defeat where the United Food and Commercial Workers leadership intervened to shut down the struggle, even removing the elected leadership of Local P-9 in Austin. To prevent another such defeat workers need to construct rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, to share information and establish lines of communications. The fight can only be won based on the widest possible mobilization of the working class.

For more information about building or joining a rank-file committee contact the WSWS using the form below.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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