

What brewery workers are up against: The international operations of Molson Coors and Anheuser-Busch

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Major struggles are in developing in breweries across the United States. Workers at the Molson Coors facility in Fort Worth, Texas have been on strike for more than a week. This Thursday, the contract for 5,000 workers at Anheuser-Busch, also members of the Teamsters, is set to expire. If both sets of workers were to strike at the same time it would impact companies covering 60 percent of the beer market in the US.

The Teamsters bureaucracy, which sold out the struggle last year at UPS to pave the way for massive job cuts, is meeting behind closed doors with management, while telling workers that all that is required of them is to hold out “one day longer” than the company. This is false; workers need not only determination, they need a strategy for victory. Coors and AB are global multinational corporations with global strategies. Workers must first understand what they are up against in order to counterpose their own strategy to that of the companies.

Coors

Molson Coors is the second-largest brewer in the US and the fourth-largest in the world. The product of a merger between Canada’s Molson and Colorado’s Coors in 2005, Molson Coors sells products in nearly 100 countries and employs 16,000 people globally. In 2016, Molson Coors purchased the American section of SABMiller, expanding even further.

Since the beginning of the Fort Worth strike, Coors management has bragged that it is well prepared to handle a work stoppage. According to the website Food Dive, CEO Gavin Hattersley said “we actually delivered a little more than our contingency plan actually suggested we should ... we’ve got five other breweries that we can shift volume to if we need to.” CFO Tracey Joubert called the impact of the strike “immaterial right now,” as the facility operates on a scab crew of salaried staff.

Whether or not the company is downplaying the full impact of the strike, it is undoubtedly true that the international scale of Molson Coors allows it to offset losses from the strike by relying on the strength of other facilities, brands and markets to boost the company’s profits.

Coors workers must be prepared for a fierce battle with the company. Coors has a long history of brutal attacks on workers.

The last strike against Coors occurred at its Golden, Colorado facility in 1977, in response to a union decertification push by the company and discriminatory practices against Hispanics, Blacks, and gays and lesbians.

Coors fought the boycott and strike tooth and nail. After a year, the strike was defeated when a portion of workers returned to work and voted to decertify the union. The boycott continued for another decade, until the AFL-CIO announced a corrupt bargain to call off its boycott in exchange

for a unionization vote at the Golden brewery, which the Teamsters lost in 1988 by a margin of two-to-one.

At the time of the strike, Coors only sold beer in 11 western states. In order to weather the boycott and strike, the company undertook an aggressive expansion campaign across the country. By 1988 it was selling beer in 49 states. In an increasingly globalized world, it is a lesson in how the company can shift resources internationally to isolate a strike.

Today, Coors is looking to grow rapidly around the world. In October 2023 the company announced an “acceleration plan” to boost growth. The plan includes four key elements: 1) grow its core brands; 2) premiumize its portfolio, growing its share of revenue from premium brands to one-third; 3) expand its line of beyond beer products in flavors, spirits and non-alcoholic beverages; and 4) invest in modernization and efficiencies.

Coors’ Fort Worth facility is an important part of this plan. In 2021 Coors invested millions to increase the brewery’s output of “beyond beer” products by 400 percent. Beyond beer includes products like hard seltzer, including major brands for Coors such as Vizzy Hard Seltzer, Topo Chico Hard Seltzer and Simply Spiked.

Beyond beer is a significant part of Coors’ corporate strategy. In 2019 Molson Coors Brewing Company restructured as Molson Coors Beverage Company and consolidated its corporate offices from four regional offices to just two, one in North America and one in Europe. This was accompanied by the firing of more than 400 corporate staff as Coors moved its main US office from Denver to Chicago.

This restructuring was built around streamlining Coors’ corporate operations and re-imagining the company as not only a beer producer, but also a major beverage company with products in hard seltzers, non-alcoholic drinks, hard liquor and premium beer brands.

As Coors expands, it is looking to cut costs and boost profit by modernizing and automating its operations. The facility in Fort Worth is important to this model, especially following the \$65 million investment to build a fully-automated variety packer.

To date, Fort Worth is the only Coors facility in the country producing both hard seltzers and flavored alcoholic drinks, producing 1.7 million barrels a year, about 20 percent of the facility’s entire output. According to the company, this has made the Fort Worth facility “self-sufficient.”

These upgrades to Fort Worth were accompanied by investments in other facilities. In 2018 Coors began the construction of a new brewery in Chilliwack, Canada, with an automated bottle packaging system called Innopack, which can package 720 bottles a minute, enabling the plant to operate with just 100 employees.

Another automated system for order picking, InnoPick, was developed by Beslogic for Coors’ plants in Montreal and Longueuil, with the manufacturer boasting it would generate “a reduction in staffing requirements” and “a significant increase in employee productivity.”

Coors has also been working on heavily expanding the capacity of its flagship brewery in Golden, Colorado, already the largest brewery in the world.

These investments and the shift in corporate strategy were celebrated by financial news site Morningstar, which wrote that it expected Coors to save \$600 million between 2020 and 2022 through cost savings, and that it expected “management to wring out more efficiencies by consolidating its sprawling brewing and packaging footprint to five major U.S. locations.”

Coors’ revitalization plan has been a massive success for the company. It reported \$10.7 billion in revenue in 2022, while in 2023 it reported a 9.4 percent increase in sales and six years’ worth of profit growth in just one year.

Anheuser-Busch

On Thursday, the contract for 5,000 workers at Anheuser-Busch will expire, potentially resulting in a strike at the country’s largest beer producer.

Anheuser-Busch is an even more formidable foe than Coors. Founded in 1852, Anheuser-Busch grew to become the largest brewer in the US by 1957.

The modern Anheuser-Busch is the product of massive mergers and acquisitions on a global scale. AB was purchased in 2008 by the Belgian and Brazilian conglomerate Inbev, itself the product of a merger of Belgian Interbrew and Brazilian Ambev in 2004. Both Interbrew and Ambev were themselves in turn created by merging some of the largest beer producers in their respective countries, which then acquired a wide collection of major beer brands in Latin America and Europe. Upon acquiring AB for \$52 billion, AB Inbev became the largest beer producer in the world.

All together, AB Inbev raked in nearly \$6.1 billion in profit in 2022, an 11 percent increase in revenue on just 2.3 percent growth in volume.

AB Inbev has grown largely through acquisitions and expanding into new markets. It owns hundreds of brands around the world, including Budweiser, Busch, Corona, Michelob, Becks, Leffe, Hoegaarden, Brahma, Stella Artois and many more on every continent.

According to AB Inbev, 70 percent of sales and 60 percent of revenue come from emerging markets. By acquiring new companies and integrating them into its distribution network, AB Inbev is able to dominate the global market. This includes bringing brands to other countries as “premium” products. Stella Artois, a Belgian brand, is produced in Brazil but marketed as a premium European product.

Like Coors, AB Inbev sees potential in the premiumization of beer and the expansion of cheap alternatives, as well as broader non-alcoholic and beyond beer brands. To achieve these goals, AB Inbev is also investing in automation.

In 2018 the company built a fully automated warehouse in Magor, South Wales, UK. According to Food Manufacture, the facility houses robotic cranes to pick from pallets in under 60 seconds. Lloyd Manship, the brewery manager for AB Inbev, said, “It means we can get our beer out and into stores and pubs faster and more efficiently than ever before... and [I] look forward to seeing its implementation all over the world.”

Jobs and working conditions are at risk at both companies. The Coors facility in Fort Worth is down to 420 workers, from around 1,500 when it opened. Beer brewers around the world are known for keeping slim labor forces to keep costs down, but where automation cannot be fully implemented, management will try to save costs through longer working hours and lower wages. This explains the brutal working conditions at the Fort Worth brewery, where 12-hour shifts and six- and seven-day

workweeks are the norm, and where management offered a provocative one dollar an hour raise over three years.

This new automation, in the service of different social interests, could be applied to ease the burden on workers, increasing pay while decreasing work hours. Instead, under capitalism, it is used for the opposite, to squeeze as much labor out of workers as possible, resulting in smaller staffs working more hours.

Wall Street profits

The growth in profits for Coors and AB Inbev has been used to finance massive windfalls for Wall Street. In 2023 Coors announced a \$2 billion stock buyback and AB Inbev a \$1 billion buyback. This massive payout to Wall Street enriched some of the largest financial institutions on the planet. Molson Coors is 11 percent owned by Vanguard, 7.5 percent by Blackrock and 7.4 percent by Dodge & Cox, three firms worth trillions of dollars.

AB Inbev is also largely controlled by the families that founded the Inbev companies. Held together under an investment firm called Stichting AB Inbev, these families own nearly 40 percent of AB Inbev. The rest of the company’s stock is largely owned by the same Wall Street powers that own Coors.

This fact is highly significant because brewery workers are not just up against individual corporations, but Wall Street institutions which own significant stakes in virtually every major business in the world. The massive financial institutions behind them will not tolerate any interruption to the flow of profits to them and they will demand that the working class pays for them.

The Path forward for brewery workers

Both Coors and Ab Inbev are corporate giants, but they are not unbeatable. While Coors has made preparations to limit the impact of the strike, the Fort Worth brewery is strategically critical for the company, putting workers in a powerful position. But to exercise this power, brewery workers need to draw the proper conclusions about their struggle.

First, this is not just a fight over pay and benefits, but the fate of the working class as a whole. It takes place amid a massive jobs bloodbath, in which major companies are using automation as a weapon to cut hundreds of thousands of jobs. Major logistics companies like Amazon and UPS have already announced tens of thousands of cuts, and thousands more are underway in the auto industry, where electric vehicle technology will be used to eliminate hundreds of thousands of more jobs in the coming years.

In those cases where the companies are unionized, these cuts are being done with the support of the union bureaucracy. The Teamsters, which claimed to have passed the best contract in generations last year at UPS, is now maintaining a total silence on the mass layoffs at the company.

While the Teamsters refuse to raise this issue, the defense of the rights and conditions of the working class *as a whole* must be central to the strategy of brewery workers.

Second, these struggles cannot be left in the hands of the Teamsters bureaucracy, which sold out the struggle at UPS and is preparing to sell out the workers at Coors and Anheuser-Busch.

In order to prevent a sellout and to put the membership in control of their struggle, workers at Coors and Anheuser-Busch must build rank-and-file committees, new democratic organizations independent of the

bureaucracy, that will put the rank-and-file in charge of the strike and contract negotiations. These committees should be built in every workplace, regardless of union affiliation, to build a network of workers' organizations and send delegations to other companies, building a unified front against the companies.

Workers at UPS and in other major corporations have already taken this step and are prepared to unite with their brothers and sisters in the beverage industry.

Third, the international corporate strategy of the corporations must be met with an international strategy of the working class. The same global operations of giants like Coors and AB Inbev have also unified the interests of workers around the world, who are fighting the same attacks by the same transnational corporations, to an unprecedented degree. By unifying brewery workers around the world, workers can pull the rug out from underneath the companies.

Faced with a globalized employer, the strike at Fort Worth cannot be contained to Texas alone. The struggles of Coors and Anheuser-Busch workers must be unified to make a united stand against the companies. They must link up with brewery and beverage workers around the world, as well as their allies at UPS, the auto industry, and every other workplace where cuts are taking place. Only by organizing internationally can the anti-worker attacks of these multinational corporations be opposed.

The scaffolding of such a world movement is already being built, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Through the IWA-RFC, workers across the world can share critical information and discuss common strategy and actions in defense of jobs all over the world.

Brewery workers in the United States should take the next step and form committees of their own. For more information, fill out the form below.



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