

Jamieson Laboratories workers in Windsor, Ontario continue strike after overwhelmingly rejecting union-backed sellout

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The strike at Jamieson Laboratories in Windsor, Ontario has now entered its second month with workers set to vote Tuesday on a second tentative agreement after having voted down, by 76 percent, a four-year deal that was unanimously endorsed by both the Unifor union's national leadership and local bargaining committees.

The 317 workers who manufacture vitamins and work in packaging and warehousing went on strike on February 1 after two weeks of bargaining resulted in a rejection of the company's initial offer. The workers are demanding better wages, benefits and working conditions.

Jamieson is touted as the leading brand of vitamins, minerals and supplements in Canada. Their products are available in over 10,000 retail locations as well as major e-commerce platforms and in over 45 countries around the world, with a special emphasis on China.

In November 2023 the company announced third quarter results of an adjusted net earnings increase of 5.4 percent over the third quarter of 2022 to \$15 million as a result of higher revenue and gross profit.

"I am pleased to report another solid quarter of financial and operational performance," said Mike Pilato, president and CEO of Jamieson Wellness. "We continue taking the actions necessary to position Jamieson—strategically, operationally, and financially—to seize new growth opportunities and to further capitalize on the value driven by our globally recognized brands.

"In Q3 our Jamieson Brands revenue increased by 15%, led by advancements in the U.S. and China as we invest to grow our distribution channels, enhance our marketing efforts, and launch innovative products that meet the evolving needs of consumers in these markets. This is our long-term growth strategy in action, and I am confident it will create significant value for our shareholders, consumers, customers, and partners.

We thank our team for their diligence managing the business in this challenging macro environment, and for their commitment to delivering on our mission of becoming a global leader in health and wellness."

As is typical, the corporate CEO erroneously claimed that distribution, marketing and innovative products create value for shareholders. It is in fact the labour supplied by workers on the shop floor that produces that value. But as ever, the overpaid executive attempts to propagate the myth that—instead of the parasitism that it really is—it is management's magical touch that converts workers' sweat into gold.

On the first day of the strike, speaking to CBC News, Nikola Savic, Jamieson plant chairperson for Unifor Local 195, justifiably stated, "They're making money, employees want to be able to make money and pay their bills. Everyone's having trouble to survive right now."

Savic added, "They're always asking for more out of everyone. Everyone's trying their best, and they're constantly asking for more but not willing to reimburse financially."

For its part, the Unifor national office stated in a press release that the strike was primarily a dispute over wages, benefits, job security and the duration of the contract. He added that "the union emphasized the importance of reaching an agreement that upholds the livelihoods and well-being of their members."

Given that Unifor should surely have been aware of their members' existing difficulties in making ends meet, the goal of merely "upholding livelihoods" must be seen as a concession from the very beginning.

The current average hourly wage for production workers at Jamieson is \$26 according to Unifor Local 195 President Emile Nabbout. That rate is barely above the nearly \$20 an hour considered a "living wage" in the region.

Speaking to the *Windsor Star*, Nabbout said, “The workers feel they deserve a slice of the record profits the company has been making year after year.” He added, “Workers are angry and upset because they feel undervalued for the work they do for the company.”

The Windsor plant is one of four facilities operated by Jamieson but it is the main production complex for capsules and tablets. An extended strike could seriously affect product availability on store shelves and the company’s profits.

Workers were absolutely right to reject a tentative agreement that does not meet their needs and was clearly nothing more than a capitulation of the entire Unifor apparatus. And they must again vote “No,” as there are no indications that the latest agreement being pushed by Unifor is substantially different.

Until 2014, Jamieson Laboratories was owned by Eric Margolis after inheriting the company from his father, American businessman, restaurant owner and theatrical producer Henry M. Margolis. The younger Margolis is well known as an old-school conservative writer and journalist who, for 27 years, was a contributing editor to the right-wing *Toronto Sun* tabloid newspaper chain. He sold the company for more than \$300 million, claiming that most of the proceeds would go to his animal welfare charity—suggesting the company was little more than a patrician hobby.

Jamieson was purchased by CCMP Capital Advisors, one of the world’s largest private equity funds. Formerly known as JP Morgan Partners, the New York City-based firm focuses on leveraged buyout and growth capital transactions.

At the time of the sale part of the financing came from the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB), which was a major investor in CCMP. In 2014 the firm’s managing director, Rich Zannino, stated CCMP intended to sell Jamieson at some point in the future. Obviously, the last 10 years have been spent relentlessly squeezing the workers to make Jamieson as attractive as possible on the acquisition market.

The transaction exposes the Jekyll and Hyde role of the Canada Pension Plan. The CPPIB ruthlessly exploits workers to generate corporate profits which it claims to be acquiring for the benefit of workers, all the while driving workers into poverty and early graves.

In an effort to soften worker militancy, Unifor Local 195 has stated on its Facebook page that protecting the Jamieson brand and, thus, job security required commitments from both sides. That is to say, workers must be willing to accept a concessions contract like the one they have already soundly rejected.

Key lessons for Jamieson workers are to be found in the Metro

grocery and Windsor Salt strikes of 2023.

A five-week strike by 3,700 Metro grocery store workers in the Greater Toronto Area was scuttled when the Unifor national executive refused to fight a court injunction against the blockade of two of the retailer’s distribution centres. Workers were quickly corralled into voting on a modified version of an agreement that already had been rejected by workers.

Upon a reluctant ratification by the workers, Unifor President Lana Payne proclaimed, “This is a historic collective agreement that sets a new bar for grocery store workers.” Part-time workers at the grocery giant told the *National Post*, “For us working people, it’s not enough. The union sold us out.” And, “This was supposed to be our movement. We may have wasted five weeks for nothing.”

A 192-day-long strike by Windsor Salt workers—in which scab labour was used throughout much of the dispute, leading to violence at one point—ended with a five-year contract that did not even begin to make up for years of inflation and the wages lost while on the picket line. The miserly strike pay provided by Unifor forced many to take alternate jobs and resulted in the loss of homes for others. It was only being ground down for more than six months that drove Windsor Salt workers to accept the rotten deal pushed by the union apparatus.

Jamieson, Metro and Windsor Salt workers are all members of Unifor, which, like every modern trade union, isolates workers along national lines and workplace, pressuring workers into compromises that only benefit business and the union bureaucracy through the mutually agreed upon, tightly constrained collective bargaining system.

The transnational character of Jamieson’s operations, its ownership by the US-based CCMP and the support of the Canada-run CPP for the company’s transfer to private equity makes clear that in their fight for better wages and working conditions workers confront the entire capitalist socioeconomic setup.

To break free of the straitjacket enforced by the nationalist union bureaucracy, workers must form independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace to unite their struggles with workers across provincial and national borders to fight for what they need, not what they are given.



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