Wisconsin brewery workers vote to authorize strike action

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Brewery workers at City Brewing in La Crosse, Wisconsin, voted on March 27 to authorize a strike, following their rejection of a company contract proposal that would have implemented 12-hour shifts. The contract, covering more than 400 members of Teamsters Local 695, expires May 8.

Jack Degnan, a union steward at the facility, told *WiscNews* that the brewery is understaffed and a section of the workers are exploited through a lower-tier of compensation. "... [T]hey want to put the burden of working all the extra overtime hours upon the union employees with less compensation and with fewer benefits," said Degnan.

When Pabst Brewing, headquartered in Los Angeles, announced back in 2019 that it had reached a long-term agreement to transfer a majority of its production to City Brewing by December 2024, it obviously saw this lower-wage section of workers as an opportunity to boost profits. Previously, Pabst's production had been carried out by MillerCoors. But the two companies had a falling out over pricing.

The parties landed in court with Pabst insisting on the partnership continuing with production at $17 per barrel, while MillerCoors protested it needed $42 per barrel to continue the agreement.

City Brewing, based in La Crosse, also has production facilities in Memphis, Tennessee and Latrobe, Pennsylvania, which together employ a total of 1,800 workers. City Brewing is the largest full-service alcoholic beverage contract manufacturer in the United States, producing name brand beers for a number of companies.

The contract struggle comes as a strike by 420 Molson Coors workers in Fort Worth, Texas nears the end of its second month. That strike, where workers are fighting against unsafe working conditions and 80-plus hour workweeks, as well as a provocative 99 cent wage offer by management, has been deliberately isolated by the Teamsters bureaucracy.

The union blocked a national strike by 5,000 Anheuser-Busch workers at the start of March after months of empty threats designed to get in front of the rank-and-file's opposition.

It imposed a contract there which paves the way for plant closures and layoffs. This is almost identical to what the Teamsters officials did last year at UPS. Only months after claiming it had won an historic victory at the logistics firm, UPS announced plans to close 200 facilities and lay off tens of thousands, meanwhile the Teamsters bureaucracy maintains a guilty silence.

To cover their betrayal at Anheuser-Busch, the Teamsters have called for a toothless consumer boycott, in spite of the fact that the network of Teamsters' drivers and warehouse workers throughout the country could have a decisive impact on the company's ability to operate.

The unions at City Brewing also work to fragment and isolate workers at the company's facilities. In 2022, workers at the company's Latrobe, Pennsylvania facility went on strike. The IUE-CWA Locals 22 and 144, which covers the workers there, worked out a four-year pact which keeps the Latrobe workers out of sync with the other two locals in their contract cycles.

In 2023, the Teamsters bureaucracy left a mere 40 workers at Leinenkugel's brewery (owned by Molson Coors) in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, to strike for some seven weeks by themselves

Nevertheless, the potential exists for a broader struggle uniting Molson Coors workers with City Brewing workers, both in Milwaukee and across the country, as well as with the ongoing struggle against the betrayal at Anheuser-Busch. In particular, workers

at City Brewing's plant in Memphis, Tennessee have a contract due to expire in the fall with Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM).

However, this requires both a fight against the company and their pro-corporate stooges in the union bureaucracy. That means the establishment of rank-and-file committees of workers in every plant and industry to coordinate such a movement.

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