Wisconsin: Molson Coors closing Leinenkugel facilities, laying off workers

Bill Shaw
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If you are one of the workers at the two Leinenkugel's breweries impacted, please contact the WSWS at (414) 377-3978.

Molson Coors announced that it is closing two Leinenkugel's breweries in Wisconsin, including the historic facility at Chippewa Falls where the company has had a presence for 157 years. The Chicago-based beer giant will shift production to its main Milwaukee brewery, a large 80-acre complex in the city's Miller Valley neighborhood.

The closures will be accompanied by layoffs of 90 workers at both facilities, according to a filing with the state's Department of Workforce Development. The Chippewa Falls closures will see the loss of 33 hourly employees. The closure of the second Leinenkugel's brewery, a smaller facility in Milwaukee, will result in the loss of 54 hourly employees.

Notably, workers at the Chippewa Falls facility had gone on strike over a year ago. As reported by the WSWS at the time, Teamsters officials isolated the strike and issued tepid calls for support from the Democratic party. That strike ended with a three-year agreement.

Teamsters Local 662 Business Agent Dan Boley said at the time, "We look forward to building on this victory in the future."

Now however, the sellout nature of the agreement is all too apparent, as workers will be unemployed less than halfway through it. The supposed "victory" has ended in a betrayal.

Further highlighting its lack of concern for communities and employees, the company did not provide advance notice of the announced closures to brewery employees, union leaders, local government officials, or the Leinenkugel family, some of whom were involved with the company as late as 2017.

Former Jacob Leinenkugel Brewing Co. President Dick Leinenkugel in a written statement said, "None of our family members were aware or counseled ahead of the decision. It's a sad day for our family and our fans."

However, Leinenkugel defended the company's decision, saying, "I know the Molson Coors leaders don't take these decisions lightly. It's clear to me that they determined that the savings resulting from the closure were significant enough to justify this difficult decision."

The brewery closures come on the heels of the closure of two healthcare facilities in the region earlier this year. On March 22, HSHS St. Joseph's Hospital in Chippewa Falls and nearby HSHS Sacred Heart Hospital in Eau Claire both shuttered their doors. Besides the impact on workers, community members' access to local healthcare was severely impacted.

Those closures were also callously announced with no advance notice to workers or the community.

Teri Ouimette, Executive Director of Chippewa Falls Main Street, said, "Seems to be the new 'trend' of corporations to not notify employees, management or the city of Chippewa Falls on what they are planning."

Brian Flynn, a Chippewa County Board Supervisor, expressed shock at the closure but had nothing to say about whether workers should fight it or whether the county government would oppose it.

Flynn said, "It came as a complete shock. I mean, that's been one of the mainstays in the city of Chippewa Falls."

Flynn was re-elected in April of this year and according to Ballotpedia was listed as "Nonpartisan" as were all Chippewa Falls County Board Supervisor candidates at the time.

No other politicians seem to have made a statement

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on the closures, including Democratic governor Tony Evers, Republican representative Derrick van Orden whose 3rd Wisconsin Congressional District covers the city of Chippewa Falls, or Chuck Hull the County Supervisor Board Chair.

The bankruptcy of the union bureaucracy and politicians of both parties could not be clearer. None has stood up for the workers involved or called for action to preserve their jobs. While they have been silent, an online petition to save the brewery already had over 8,000 signatures from community members.

Teamsters Local 200 and 662, of which the soon to be laid off workers are members, could only muster up a few sentences, stating, “It is a tragedy that Molson Coors wants to close the doors on this brewery, which has been a point of pride for Chippewa Valley for more than 150 years. The Teamsters are doing everything in our power to fight for and protect our members’ rights.”

The lesson for the working class is that it must defend its interests by organizing its own political program independent from the unions and two-party system. Workers should create their own rank-and-file committees to expand their struggle and appeal for the broadest possible support among workers everywhere.

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