

# Starbucks workers' strike approaches 4th week

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A nationwide strike by Starbucks workers is approaching the start of its fourth week on Wednesday. The strike, which began on November 13 with walkouts at 65 stores across more than 20 cities, expanded to 120 stores on Black Friday. Workers are demanding higher wages, stable schedules, an end to understaffing and action on hundreds of unfair labor practice charges stemming from years of union busting.

Contract talks, which began in February, collapsed in April after delegates of Starbucks Workers United (SWU)—organized under Workers United (WU), an affiliate of the SEIU—rejected a contract offering a below-inflation 2 percent raise for baristas.

This is the second strike in a year called by SWU. Around 5,000 workers struck for five days last Christmas before being sent back to work without any concessions from management.

On December 1, New York City Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani and Senator Bernie Sanders appeared at a picket line in Brooklyn to declare their solidarity. Their visit coincided with the announcement of a \$35 million settlement for 15,000 New York City Starbucks workers, the result of litigation showing the company violated fair scheduling laws more than half a million times in three years.

None of this changes the basic reality confronting workers. Even the few workers who will receive a share of the payout—about 4 percent of the company's 361,000 US employees—this will be swallowed up by inflation as it is distributed over three years.

Four years after the first Starbucks union election in Buffalo, no contract has been signed. Wages remain low, hours remain unstable, understaffing remains chronic and retaliation continues. These conditions are the product of a deliberate strategy by Starbucks management to stall, demoralize and wear workers down.

For Starbucks—which posted \$3.76 billion in net income in 2024—the fines in New York are simply absorbed as a cost of doing business. They do not alter the basic issues for workers.

## The next stage of the fight

Starbucks baristas have demonstrated initiative, courage and determination in launching the strike. But to win, the struggle must be expanded, unified and taken out of the narrow channels imposed from above.

The strike must not remain confined to isolated store walkouts. All 10,000 members of SWU must walk out at all at 650 unionized locations nationwide. Workers should organize flying pickets to nearby stores, regardless of union status to encourage participation and shut down whole areas.

They should begin holding meetings on the picket lines to formulate broad, fighting demands—real wage increases tied to inflation, guaranteed hours, adequate staffing, protection from retaliation—to build a united struggle with workers across the country, beginning with the service industry and the 2 million members of the SEIU. The struggle at Starbucks is inseparable from the broader conditions facing workers nationwide.

To bring the full weight of the working class to bear, workers need organization and coordination that the official structures will not provide. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees—democratically controlled by workers themselves—and linking these committees into the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which provides a framework for uniting workers across industries and across borders.

SWU officials have kept the struggle fragmented, store by store, and have refused to organize a nationwide strike. Their orientation is not to the development of a mass working class movement but appeals to management and sections of the corporate political establishment.

This corresponds to the material interests of the union bureaucracy, a privileged social layer whose income and institutional position depend on maintaining labor peace. The bureaucracy fears the very thing workers are striving for: a unified movement against inequality and oligarchy.

## What's behind Sanders and Mamdani's visit

Many strikers no doubt greeted the appearance of Mamdani and Sanders as a sign that the strike is gaining influence and political support. But to subordinate themselves to these forces would be a grave mistake.

Mamdani was elected on the basis of widespread opposition to austerity, inequality and the growth of fascistic forces. Yet since his election he has spent his time meeting with Trump, Wall Street firms, crypto financiers and the Democratic Party hierarchy. He devotes vastly more attention to cultivating relationships with the right and with corporate power than to workers.

Their visit to the picket line serves the same function as similar visits by Democrats in past strikes, including Biden's intervention in the 2023 United Auto Workers "stand up strike," which ended in a sellout contract which has enabled thousands of layoffs. These picket line visits provide a photo opportunity while reinforcing the political framework that has kept workers paralyzed for years.

This is Mamdani's political role and that of the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left factions of the Democrats. One cannot defend even the most limited interests of workers while simultaneously seeking "collaboration" with the very corporate and political forces attacking them.

Sanders himself has spent his long political career combining phrases about "democratic socialism" with support for American nationalism, war and the Democratic Party leadership, from Hillary Clinton to Joe Biden to Kamala Harris. His task, and Mamdani's, is to channel workers' opposition back into the Democratic Party and away from the development of an independent movement.

SWU is one of many unions established over the last few years which younger workers have joined because they see them as more militant, democratic alternatives to the established corrupt, bureaucratically-controlled trade unions. They receive considerable support from the Democratic Party and the union hierarchy, who see them as a means of providing themselves with a semblance of credibility. In 2022, Sanders spoke alongside SEIU officials and other Democrats at "Unity Fest" in Richmond, Virginia.

This is the kiss of death. It has proven impossible to combine ties with these pro-capitalist forces with the demands of the workers. One example is the fate of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which won a major union election at one of the company's warehouses in Staten

Island, New York, in 2022. More than three years later it still does not have a contract. An internal factional crisis led to it being absorbed by the Teamsters union, whose bureaucrats have helped Amazon's competitor UPS slash tens of thousands of jobs, and whose top official Sean O'Brien is an open fascist and Trump supporter.

## The international and political nature of the struggle

The decisive question, both in this strike and in the situation as a whole, is the emergence of the working class as an independent force. Starbucks workers are fighting a giant corporation supported by both capitalist parties and backed by a global system of exploitation. This struggle unfolds under a Trump administration preparing sweeping attacks on democratic rights, migrant workers and labor protections.

The issues confronting Starbucks workers are shared by workers around the world facing layoffs, inflation, war, austerity and state repression. The urgent need is the building of a new movement of the working class, uniting across borders in defense of their common universal interests.

Workers must take the struggle into their own hands. Baristas cannot wait for permission from the SEIU or the Democratic Party which will not come. They must begin organizing rank-and-file committees in every store, linked across cities and regions, armed with a program that expresses the needs and aspirations of the entire workforce.

This is the only basis on which to expand the strike, unify workers and mobilize the tremendous power of the working class against Starbucks and the corporate and political forces behind it.

To carry this forward, Starbucks workers should join and build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which provides the structure and political clarity necessary to transform this fight into a genuine movement for equality, dignity and workers' power.



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