

“If workers band together, our sword and shield could be huge”

Kellogg’s workers in Battle Creek, Michigan denounce two-tier wages and call for the broadening of their strike

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The strike by 1,400 Kellogg’s cereal workers in the US continued into its second week on Tuesday. Workers at four facilities are striking to demand wage increases that keep up with inflation, an end to brutal work schedules that keep them on the job for weeks at a time, and an end to the hated two-tier wage structure.

The strike is part of a broader upsurge by the working class, as workers battle against the subordination of the response to the coronavirus pandemic in almost every country to private profit. Kellogg’s and other major multinational firms are forcing employees to work hundreds of hours of overtime to compensate for the disruption of global supply chains and to insulate their profits from the social and economic consequences of the pro-corporate policy of “herd immunity.”

Tens of thousands of workers in the United States have already authorized strike action, and thousands more are already on strike. As of this writing, more than 10,000 workers at John Deere are poised to go out on strike at 12:01 AM on Thursday. Worldwide, 150,000 metalworkers are on strike in South Africa and similar numbers of auto parts workers are pressing for strike action in Turkey to demand wage increases above the rate of inflation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket line in Battle Creek, Michigan, where Kellogg’s global headquarters is located. The “cereal city” of 50,000, where rival company Post also has its headquarters, is virtually a company town. During a brief walk downtown, one encounters the Kellogg’s arena, a Kellogg Community Credit Union, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Institute for Food and Nutrition Research and a mural of cereal plants.

The area has been devastated by jobs cuts in the industry. In 1995, the factory at Battle Creek still had a workforce of 1,700. That year, as part of a global cost-cutting campaign

that also saw the sacking of 140 workers in Australia, the company eliminated 800 jobs at the plant. Now there are only 330 workers remaining.

The Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers’ International Union has focused its campaign on attacking the company’s presence in Mexico. But the fact is that Kellogg’s is a multinational corporation with 20 cereal factories spanning every inhabited continent. There is powerful potential for a broad struggle uniting food production workers across the world.

“There’s 33,000 Kellogg employees internationally, roughly. Absolutely, the strike should be expanded,” Damion Kreger, a lifelong Battle Creek resident and worker with 13 years seniority, said. “A lot of the other employees at Kellogg are salaried positions where you are in marketing, finance, you’re in logistics. There’s a lot of different departments that go into an international company.

“There’s a lot of workers I would love to see organized. I don’t know if all of them are. I would love to see them organized and create one gigantic Kellogg movement. If it was 20,000 strong, how awesome would that be?”

Damion described work inside the plant. “We are a highly skilled workforce. To make cereal is not what I would call a normal factory job, where you are doing the same activity 1,000-2,000 times a day. It is a process. We are making food on a grand scale. Three hundred million pounds a year with 330 workers. Essentially, each employee is responsible for almost 1 million pounds of food annually.”

He continued: “We have a policy where you can be forced to work 16 hours. It can only be once a week, but that’s on top of being scheduled seven days a week. Last year, I worked 2,946 hours. And I did the math. I averaged 7.63 hours a day for every single one of the 365 days last year. That was my work schedule.”

Damion’s wife Angie added: “My husband worked over

100 days straight last year during the pandemic. He was hailed as a ‘hero,’ a frontline worker feeding America. He went to work every single day while people at corporate everywhere, especially Kellogg’s, worked from the comfort of their homes. These men and women sacrifice so much time with their families, holidays—we’ve had countless holidays where he’s not home to enjoy them with his children because he’s at work.

“You’ve got these large corporations making millions and billions of dollars on the backs of these people who are working seven days a week. And the reason that these conditions are like this is because they don’t want to spend the extra to invest in employees to make sure that they are staffed adequately. You know, if they were to add more full-time employees here, or at Frito-Lay or Nabisco, it would cost that corporation more money. So, they would rather just work the people they have an ungodly amount of hours.

“Kellogg’s runs what they call a 28 and 3, where their equipment runs for 28 days and then they clean it for 3 days. But the employees are still working. The machinery gets three days off, but not the employees.

“His aunt passed away this summer and he had to do a call-in and get a point because he wanted to go to his aunt’s funeral as a pallbearer. He had to call in sick and get an attendance point.”

Another striking worker, Chris, added: “We put in over 835 overtime hours last year [per worker, on average]. They can tell you 10 minutes before the end of your shift and you’re supposed to go home, if they have a spot to fill, you can get stuck for another eight hours. And they’re supposed to be able to do this once a week, but they twist it according to business needs and sometimes that happens more than once a week.

“A lot of people downtown [Kellogg’s’ world headquarters] get their paid three-day weekends on holidays. We don’t even know what a regular weekend is over here.”

The discussion turned to the use of scabs by management to keep the plant running. “There were scabs driving into the plant through the picket line while we were talking about this,” Chris said. “The union, which has an office literally across the street, didn’t do anything to prevent this.”

He explained that the company was using the same scab labor firm it had used during a previous strike. Chris recalled that many people were missing their tools, which had been stolen by the scabs. So many things were taken from the plant, including from the factory’s machines, that they couldn’t operate at full capacity at first when the strike ended.

This exploded the claim that the company cannot afford higher wages, he said, since they can clearly afford to resupply themselves because they hired “thieving scabs.”

Damion described the two-tier wage structure in the plant. “The lady or gentleman I am working next to on a daily basis might be making a third less, while not getting the same benefits, the same vacation that the legacy worker gets, and no pension. Legacy—that’s what they refer to us [first-tier workers] as. They want to make the second tier the only tier. So, when the legacy employees retire, they will fill in the positions with the lower-tier, lower-wage workers.

“We know that if we allow this to continue, it’s going to go from 30 percent to 40 to 60... and the next thing you know, everyone’s [second-tier] there. We’re protecting the jobs for the future.”

The spread of the coronavirus in the plant is also a major concern.

“I’m part of the EHS, Environmental Health and Safety team,” Damion said. “We have done a very good job, we have a mandated mask policy, we have hand and foot sanitizing stations everywhere... Having said all that, we have had 75 employees out of 330 test positive. Just under 25 percent have tested positive. You can take all the precautions, but it’s still a real issue that we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis.”

Angie added, “And you have to remember too, that when those 75 employees were out, other employees had to cover their shifts. Anytime a worker is out because of COVID, that means another worker is working a 16-hour shift.”

“Most of the time we found out [about COVID cases in the plant], it was because when we see that so-and-so isn’t here, we’ll ask each other about this person,” Chris said. “And when someone reaches out to them, the word will go back around that they tested positive for the coronavirus... I mean, we wouldn’t know if a person who was working right next to us was a carrier the other day.”

Damion concluded with a call for the expansion of their struggle. “If we [workers] band together, if we take the power that our one group, which is 80 percent of America, at the very least, our shield and sword could be huge. We can protect against a lot and stand for a lot.

“Our family, our town, my community, all the local businesses that we support—this is bigger than just us... We’re trying to lead the way. We’ve talked about doing this for a long time. You can only take so much. Somebody’s got to take a stand sooner or later.”



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