

Kellogg's strikers overwhelmingly reject sellout contract, company moves to hire permanent replacements

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Striking Kellogg's workers have voted "overwhelmingly" against a tentative agreement containing major concessions to management over two-tiered wages, the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union (BCGTM) announced in a tersely worded statement released Tuesday morning. The 1,400 workers at four plants across the US have been on strike for more than two months. Vote totals were not available as of this writing.

The outcome of the vote, held on Sunday, comes in defiance of threats from both Kellogg's management and the union. Few details of the contract were made public before the vote, and Battle Creek workers were expected to vote the same day as their informational meetings, a clear indication that the contract was a betrayal.

Workers speaking anonymously to the *World Socialist Web Site* before the vote said that the few details they had seen—pay increases of only 3 percent, less than half of the current rate of inflation, and the elimination of caps on the size of the second-tier workforce—were enough for them to know the contract was a sell-out.

Kellogg's management made it clear during negotiations that they would not budge on the most essential demands of workers, walking out of negotiations and threatening to permanently replace striking workers. In a statement Tuesday after the results were announced, Kellogg's announced they now intend to carry out this threat and will immediately move to hire permanent replacements "to ensure business continuity."

Management also blamed the union for "creating unrealistic expectations for our employees"—in other words, for insufficiently softening up workers before the vote.

Workers took to social media during the voting process

to express their anger over the deal. "What's the point in even voting on something that didn't solve any of the reasons and why they went on strike in the first place?!?" one wrote. "What about back pay for these workers or signing bonus for these workers to even come back... seems like a pointless vote to me."

Another wrote, "No cap on transitionals [second-tier workers] is a death sentence. A percent of a shrinking number means less and less full-time employees. No cap on transitionals will result in a replaced work force with no full health care, no COLA, and no pension. It's exactly why we went on strike in the first place. It's exactly why I will stay on strike. We will not cut the throats of future employees."

"3% barely covers inflation, and that's only for legacy employees?" a third worker wrote. "I say hold out for more and abolish your tier system." Another simply said, "Not worth a vote! Union Negotiators, you gotta be kidding!"

The outcome of the vote is a major setback for the union bureaucracy, who were clearly staggered by the result. This was indicated both by the clipped statement announcing the result as well as the fact that the release of the results came a full two days after balloting took place.

Pseudo-left groups such as More Perfect Union, Labor Notes and the Democratic Socialists of America, who have been promoting the BCTGM's conduct of the strike throughout, were also caught flat-footed by the announcement. Many took to social media to feign support for the rejection of the very same contract which they had either supported explicitly or through a guilty silence before the vote. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who invited Local 3G president Trevor Bidelman onto a recent livestream to posture as a rank-and-file leader of Kellogg's workers, has not even acknowledged the result.

The vote also prompted worried responses in the corporate press, evoking nervous comparisons to the strike at John Deere, where workers rebelled against repeated sellout contracts pushed by the United Auto Workers. “With the inflation we’re experiencing now and the fact that we’re in a relatively tight labor market, workers do feel emboldened,” one Cornell researcher told the *New York Times*. The well-heeled layers for whom the *Times* speaks are terrified that workers may break through the barriers imposed upon them by the pro-corporate trade unions.

The courageous stand by Kellogg’s workers brings the two-month strike at the multinational food giant to the next stage. Kellogg’s workers can push to win their demands, but only if they take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the BCTGM and appeal for the broadest possible support from workers throughout the US and internationally.

A stark warning must be made: If BCTGM remains in control of the strike, it will be defeated. The union will not respond to the contract rejection by broadening the struggle or fighting for better contract terms, but by redoubling its attempts to enforce a sellout. The income of the privileged BCTGM bureaucrats, who collectively took home more than \$4.6 million last year, places them in a social layer far removed from and hostile to the interests of Kellogg’s workers. For them, allowing the company to fire workers and hire permanent replacements is preferable to a victory which emboldens workers at Kellogg’s and other sections of workers throughout the country.

The Kellogg’s strike is only one in a series of recent battles by the working class, in which the unions have sought to undermine and isolate workers’ positions and enforce substandard contracts which, in most cases, do not even keep pace with inflation or even market conditions. In addition to the John Deere strike, which the UAW eventually shut down by forcing workers to vote again on the same contract they had already rejected, the IATSE union last month called off a strike by 60,000 film production workers and rammed through a contract that a majority of workers voted against.

Health care unions at Kaiser Permanente used the same underhanded tactics to call off a strike by 32,000 nurses in southern California, and the same day that the vote totals were announced at Kellogg’s, online balloting began for tens of thousands of Kaiser Permanente health care workers on a sellout contract which contains substandard wages and no changes to staffing ratios, but which will

funnel tens of millions of corporate dollars into the pockets of the union bureaucracy.

As for the BCTGM itself, it had already shut down a strike by hundreds of Nabisco workers shortly before the Kellogg’s strike began and before workers had won any of their demands, effectively preventing a united struggle between workers at the two companies.

Throughout the Kellogg’s strike, the BCTGM has promoted “America First” demagoguery, demanding that the company stop producing cereal in Mexico. This culminated in foul and demeaning comments by Bidelman to Yahoo Finance, who said, “you’re told quite regularly not to drink the water in Mexico. So, I don’t know why you would want to eat the food that was made from that water.”

This anti-Mexican campaign serves the function of covering up the BCTGM’s own role in signing off on job cuts for decades and blocking any struggle against them. But it also is aimed at dividing and disrupting the unity of workers in the present, separating Kellogg’s workers in the US from the powerful reservoir of support from Kellogg’s international workforce, which is spread across every inhabited continent.

To carry the struggle forward, Kellogg’s workers must move now to build a new organization independent of the bought-and-paid-for union apparatus. This means following the example of John Deere workers, Kaiser nurses and others in building a rank-and-file strike committee to oppose the union’s betrayals and appeal for the broadest possible support in the US and internationally.



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