

RWDSU touts Kansas City Kellogg's contract with below-inflation raises as "historic"

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Work at Kellogg's? Contact the WSWS, and tell us about the conditions at your plant. Workers' identities will be kept confidential.

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) announced on March 30 that a new three-year contract at the Kellogg's plant in Kansas City, Kansas, had been ratified. An RWDSU press release, touting the deal with the multinational food giant as "historic," claims that gains were made in several areas, including pensions, dental insurance and vacation scheduling, without offering any details of the supposed improvements.

The one area where Local 184-L does provide specific information, wages, is revealing. The press release states that workers will receive a 15.5 percent increase in wages over the course of a three-year contract, which it terms "unprecedented." Broken down by year, the increases would include 6 percent in the first year, followed by increases of 5 percent and 4.5 percent in years two and three, with a \$500 bonus added to the final year in the contract.

The fact that these modest increases are termed "the highest wage increases ever in Local 184-L history" indicates that the 570 Kellogg's workers in Kansas City have endured a long period of wage stagnation under the RWDSU bureaucracy.

Further, the union makes no mention of any cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) in the new contract to protect against the rapidly increasing cost of living, meaning that workers will likely see an actual cut to real wages of 2 percent or more with inflation taken into account.

Consumer prices in the US rose 7 percent in 2021 and have remained near a 40-year high. Gas and food costs have surged this year, driven by the ongoing disequilibrium in supply chains due to the pandemic, which has been significantly exacerbated by the US-NATO confrontation with Russia in Ukraine in recent weeks.

The RWDSU statement is also notable for what it does not mention. A central issue in the strike by 1,400 Kellogg's workers last year—as well as walkouts at Frito-Lay and Nabisco—were the sweatshop conditions in the plants, with workers routinely compelled to work 12- to 16-hour days, six or seven days a week, weeks on end. The Kansas City plant is no exception, with numerous reviews by former workers on job placement site Indeed.com describing brutal levels of overtime. Typical comments include, "Work-life balance at Kellogg Company is bad, long hours you work 16 hours 7 days a week," "Hardly any time off of work. Be prepared to work double shifts (16 hours),"

and "Most employees LIVE here!"

The silence of the RWDSU over working hours can only mean that the contract will perpetuate the grinding exploitation workers experience at the plant.

There is good reason to doubt the authenticity of the remaining claims made by the RWDSU of improvements in other areas. Union officials have become notorious in the use of over-hyped and even lying press releases and contract summaries to cloak their collaboration with management and slip through contract language that guarantees the generation of profits for the companies at the expense of rank-and-file workers.

In its own press release, Kellogg's management declared its satisfaction with the contract, saying it "helps ensure the long-term viability of the bakery and our business." In other words, the RWDSU tailored its proposal to ensure the company's profitability.

Based on the extreme levels of exploitation in its plants, Kellogg's has profited enormously during the pandemic, seeing its net income rise from \$977 million in 2019 to \$1.49 billion in 2021, an increase of 52 percent. The company has squandered hundreds of millions in dividends and share buybacks, increasing the fortunes of its executives and large investors.

The attempt by the RWDSU to dress up the Kellogg's Kansas City contract as a victory comes as the union's second attempt to unionize Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama, appears to be headed toward another defeat.

RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum, commenting on the Kansas City contract, said, "This contract is further evidence of the power of a union voice and collective bargaining. Across the country, working people are seeing historic benefits of union membership, like this new Kellogg's contract, and seeing the difference union membership can make in their own lives."

The reality is the opposite. While workers have shown increasing determination to improve their living standards in strikes and other struggles in the recent period, the union executives have ignored the voice of the workers and exerted every form of coercion to impose the companies' dictates.

The RWDSU's campaign to unionize Amazon workers at Bessemer offered no "voice" for the workers. The union raised no specific demands on the company, instead hoping to cultivate vague hopes that it would somehow improve workers' livelihoods.

It is significant that after the defeat of the first unionization effort at Bessemer, the federal National Labor Relations Board, with the

clear backing of the White House, stepped in to order a new election. The big business Democratic Party, which has decades of strikebreaking in its history, as well as much of the corporate media and even Republican Party politicians had previously made clear their support for the RWDSU's Bessemer campaign, with President Biden taking the unprecedented step of openly endorsing the union drive. Moreover, the effort to bring in either the RWDSU, the Teamsters, or another union at Amazon has been zealously supported by pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America.

The RWDSU's contract at Kellogg's in Kansas City reveals the type of organizations the Democratic Party are hoping to bring in at Amazon. The Biden administration and sections of the ruling class view the trade unions as critical tools in the suppression and management of the class struggle, the enforcement of low wages, and the intensification of workers' exploitation. Having overseen decades of declining living standards for its members, the RWDSU and its counterparts are offering their services to carry out a similar role at Amazon and other companies.

The 2021 Kellogg's strike

The increasing promotion of the pro-corporate unions by the ruling class is a direct response to rising social tensions and a growing strike movement, which emerged early last year and has involved tens of thousands of workers in auto, mining, education, health care and other industries.

Kellogg's itself was hit by a nearly three-month strike by 1,400 workers at the company's cereal plants in Nebraska, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Tennessee last fall. In early December, the BCTGM (Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union) attempted to push through a tentative agreement with below-inflation raises and the continuation of the two-tier wage. Workers, however, rebelled against the deal, overwhelmingly voting it down.

After continuing to keep the struggle isolated and keeping workers starved on \$105 a week in strike pay, the BCTGM then proceed to ram through a virtually identical agreement in late December, cynically hailing it as a "victory."

Workers had a different opinion. "Those stupid simple bastards [in the union] sold us out," one worker at the Battle Creek, Michigan plant told the WSWS at the time. "The BCTGM basically brought back the same contract as earlier proposals and forced a revote."

The contract had a single wage increase in the first year of a five-year contract, followed by cost-of-living increases in the remaining years. The modifications to the lower tier of a two-tiered wage system offered loopholes whereby the company could lay off workers before they graduated to the upper tier and hire new workers who would have to start at the bottom.

The BCTGM has struggled to muzzle opposition to the sellout in the aftermath of the strike. One worker charged the union with censorship on its Facebook page over the two-tier system. "You all

keep deleting the comments that tell the truth about the two tier system. It is not gone. THERE IS STILL A TWO TIER SYSTEM."

It should not be overlooked that the RWDSU made no effort to unite Kellogg's workers in Kansas City with cereal workers in the BCTGM during last year's strike, nor vice versa. Even when Kellogg's threatened to hire permanent replacements, the RWDSU did not protest. Undoubtedly, the Kansas City Kellogg's workers, angered by the decades of givebacks to the company and wishing to demonstrate their solidarity, would have been ready to join the struggle of their brothers and sisters in Michigan and other states.

A major factor in the settlement at Kansas City, as well as pro-company agreements imposed this year at the oil and gas companies, is the Biden administration's escalation of the war in the Ukraine. Both the Democratic and Republican Parties, and the capitalist class as a whole, are using the war drive in an effort to channel explosive class tensions outward, and fear that any given strike could disrupt their plans and spark a broader movement in the working class. At the same time, the massive increases in funding for the military required for confrontation with Russia and China necessitate a major assault on social programs and the living standard of the working class in the US.

However, the spiraling cost of basic necessities and the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic are fueling an upsurge in the class struggle globally. With mass anti-government demonstrations breaking out over food costs and other profound social grievances in Sri Lanka, Peru and other countries, workers increasingly confront a political struggle against the capitalist state and the ruling class' political representatives.

The RWDSU contract in Kansas City and the 2021 Kellogg's strike underscore the need for new fighting organizations of the working class. The WSWS urges Kellogg's workers to organize rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the pro-corporate unions. Such committees will provide a means for workers to establish communication across plants, overcome the divisions fostered by management and the unions, and coordinate and unify their struggles throughout the US and internationally.



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