

Strike by Northern Illinois Bay Valley Foods workers enters ninth week

By George Gallanis
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On Tuesday, some 94 workers at the Bay Valley Foods in Pecatonica, Illinois, 15 miles west of Rockford, began the ninth week of their strike against the food distributing company. Striking outside of the Bay Valley Foods plant for nearly 24 hours a day for the past 75 days, the workers have tenaciously withstood the bitter cold of the Midwest's ongoing winter.

Teamsters Local 754 called the strike on November 12 after negotiations, which began in May, failed to produce an agreement they could get rank-and-file workers to accept. Workers are striking to oppose increases in health care costs, win improved pension funding and block Bay Valley Foods from moving the plant to Iowa, according to the union.

Union and Bay Valley Foods representatives have met with federal mediators several times since the strike began but, according to media reports, both sides cannot reach an agreement on health care costs.

Bay Valley Foods, which produces private label foods and food service goods, is a subsidiary of TreeHouse Foods, a multinational food processing company, ranked 427 on the Fortune 500 list in 2017. In 2014, it brought in \$2.9 billion of revenue. Notably, from 2005 to 2007 former first lady Michelle Obama served on the board of directors.

According to Indeed.com, a machine operator for Bay Valley Foods makes \$13.28 an hour, a senior machine operator makes \$12.83 an hour and an assembler makes \$11.18.

Ben, one of the striking workers, told the *World Socialist Web Site* workers had walked out because "Treehouse Foods has gutted our current contract and wants to implement measures that would in essence break the union." He said workers are demanding an increase in wages, "job preservation, and an increase in

our pension contribution from Treehouse Foods."

Ben added, "Treehouse Foods has a philosophy of arrogance and power. They have hired non-union temp workers to do our jobs and at a great expense a security firm to patrol, harass and attempt to intimidate us during this long strike."

When asked about unifying the working class in a common struggle against the exploitation of workers around the world by the corporations, he said, "I think unifying the working class is a more productive approach to opposing the corporate war against workers. All unions should be fighting the battle for better wages and benefits."

A genuine fight by workers would receive popular support around the Rockford area, where thousands of workers, including Fiat Chrysler workers at the Belvidere plant, are anxious to recoup lost wages and benefits, handed over by the Teamsters, the UAW and other unions. Once a major hub of machine tools, farm machinery, furniture and fastener manufacturing, surrounding Winnebago now has an official poverty rate of 15.9 percent, with 25 percent of young people under the age of 18 living below the poverty line.

This regression is the product of decades of collusion by the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions in the name of making US corporations more competitive and profitable, while politically subordinating workers to the corporate-controlled Democrats. The Teamsters are now praising the "American First" nationalism of Trump, even as he hands over trillions in tax cuts to big business.

If the Bay Valley Foods strike is not to be defeated, like so many struggles before it, rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. Rank-and-file strike committees should be elected to establish lines of communication, including

through social media, with workers and young people to mobilize the broadest support for this fight.

Workers must be warned, however, that the Teamsters are colluding with the federal mediators and the company to impose yet another concession contract. Teamsters Local 754 principal officer Chuck Murdoch told a local news outlet, “These members have been making sacrifices for the past eight years. Their last contract took away any matching into their 401k, so they’re fed up and they’re out here, unfortunately, fighting for their rights.”

These givebacks did not fall from the sky, they were imposed by the Teamsters, which are trying to the same thing again. “We gave the company an offer they could’ve accepted back in September,” Murdoch acknowledged. “It was a reasonable offer. They rejected it. They chose to go down this road, knowing we’d go on strike. But they’ve been jamming contracts down these guy’s throats for eight years, and they’re not going to let it happen anymore.”

This makes it clear that it is only the opposition of the rank-and-file workers that has prevented the Teamsters from signing another miserable deal. This opposition must now be broadened.

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