

What we learned from the strike at Frito-Lay for better pay and one day off

***Story courtesy of Kansas City Reflector**

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We observed something different this past month as the Frito-Lay Corp. and workers agreed on a contract at the Topeka facility. The Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Union Local 218 were out [on strike for over three weeks](#). At the center of these failed talks were wage increases and forced overtime with no time off. The members there hadn't received an increase in over 10 years. We have witnessed in past contracts between Frito-Lay and its workers that the union members would have informational pickets and the membership would approve the agreement and it was back to work with the same issues. However, this time was different. It was as if a sleeping giant was waking up, and the members had had enough. They voted a contract offer down. Many of the members who had been working at Frito-Lay for 10-plus years said they were fed up with the unbearable work schedules that included 70-80 hours per week with no time off, and no family time.

We witnessed what is the heart of all unions across the country. **SOLIDARITY!** Local 218 members coming together, standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the picket line. When a union stands together, they gain strength in negotiations, with a stronger voice at the table. The company will treat their workers with dignity and respect and remove the proverbial foot off their employees' necks. We are proud and admire the courage of these workers risking all that they hold most valuable — their family's well-being. Think beyond lost wages and possible permanent job loss. Think health insurance and retirement, the future of their family unit and the unknown. Wage and hour workers who depend on a paycheck every week are never too far from being homeless with job loss.

Local 218 is not affiliated with the Kansas AFL-CIO but their injustice is an injustice to all of us. We saw many other unions from across the state standing with the workers, and we spoke out about the injustice being done to the workers across the region and the state. The Topeka community came in support of the workers. Indeed, support came from all over the state and the country. The Topeka Capital-Journal, Wichita Eagle and many other news agencies like CNN, Newsweek, the Washington Post and the New York Times all reported about what was happening to the workers in Topeka. Pressure was building against the company to negotiate fairly. More and more stories were being leaked about the work environment.

[The strike ended](#), after the company agreed to provide a 4% raise over two years and guarantee one day off each week.

The positive takeaways for the labor movement are that you can stand up to the corporate giant you work for if your fight is just and you are united. The public was sympathetic to the truth and reality of their stories because they could relate — the lack of family time in this case was just off the charts!

The Kansas AFL-CIO was obliged to highlight the plight of workers at Frito-Lay as it relates to big business that often invests heavily in fighting to break the union. The Frito-Lay anti-union tactics were yet another example of the bullying that is often done by companies to cease workers from bargaining collectively and having union representation. Frito-Lay and its parent company, PepsiCo, displayed exactly why passing the ProAct (Protect the Right to Organize Act) is necessary. Workers here faced intimidation, an unsafe work environment, threats of termination, replacement (by temp workers), and discrimination. That was all before they could even get to negotiating compensation, work schedules or benefits like health care and retirement. Now think of the health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which these workers kept producing the Frito-Lay products. So this situation, not uncommon, really puts a magnifying glass on these issues when we think of employees trying to come together to form a union for the first time and have a voice for their work environment.

Again, we are so proud of these courageous workers. They stuck together like the family they are and won some gains — not for just themselves but for everybody.

Our National AFL-CIO conducted a poll in 2020 that indicated union favorability trending upward at 65%, and 69% favorability for the PRO Act, so one may say in Topeka and across the country the balance is shifting.