

January 2026

THE SERVICE WORKER



“A Critique of Starbucks Workers United From a Barista Behind the Picket Line”

Starbucks Workers United has been planning an unfair labor practice strike for several months, all while maintaining the idea that these plans should be kept away from the non-organizing committee baristas. SBWU staffers told baristas that the strike is meant to push for Starbucks to finalize their contract; however, these same staffers have been telling baristas that the only reason they hadn't struck in so long while the contract was being negotiated was due to an agreement they made on behalf of the baristas, without the non-bargaining baristas' knowledge. Workers United has kept their agreements with Starbucks, and other information, away from baristas by using “secrecy” from the company as an excuse. All this while maintaining, weeks before the strike, that Starbucks SHOULD know about their plans, as if Starbucks should prepare for the strike. Only after informing Starbucks directly do they decide to tell the non-organizing committee baristas of their plans, and even then, only to a certain extent.

During the recent strike, SBWU staffers were telling organizing committee members of each store that the plans should be kept discreet the months leading up to the strike. As the strike was happening, they were again making plans for potential actions without notifying the baristas of 1) what those actions were, and 2) when they were supposed to happen. Thus, not allowing for baristas to financially, nor generally, prepare for the actions SBWU proposes. Given that they inform the company, they serve Starbucks more than the baristas they supposedly represent.

On their website, SBWU claims that the strike is to demand better staffing, higher pay, and resolution of unfair labor practices. Workers United representatives have never explained the grievances behind these ULPs, and this higher pay has never been specified. They have only stated that the demand is for pay to increase depending on the average cost of living in each Starbucks district. Again, not taking the regular baristas opinion into account. Plus, they hide that their wish to settle the contract comes at a cost: once the contract is settled, they can no longer strike against Starbucks, among other issues that take rights away from baristas. Similarly, they intentionally hide baristas from Workers United's parent company SEIU and how it's run by a bank, which shows their real stakes will always be in generating profits. They led up to this strike with many months of planning without involving rank-and-file baristas, neither to consider their opinions nor to help them prepare for the strike. Without fully understanding or preparing for the strike, the baristas' full participation is stifled by keeping them from being heard, excluding and demoralizing them.

Not only was the strike poorly planned, the low pay offered to striking workers left poor, working-class baristas with no choice but to work during the duration of the strike. The pay offered by Starbucks Workers United was offensively inconsiderate: part-time baristas (between 12 to 30 hours a week) were offered \$50 for five hours at the picket line for everyday that they picketed, no more, no less. Full-time baristas (between 30

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to 40 hours a week) were offered between \$60-\$90 for the same. This is not even what the average barista makes since Starbucks raised their minimum wage to \$15 an hour. In response to concerns from striking baristas worried about losing their health insurance, SBWU offered COBRA as a replacement health insurance. Notably, those of us that have had to use it before know that COBRA is one of the worst insurance companies you could have.

During this period of strikes, and throughout the history of Starbucks Workers United in general, SBWU staffers have had strong opinions on who, among the rank-and-file baristas, are “trustworthy” and who are “scabs”. Understandably there will be and are untrustworthy baristas when it comes to labor rights, especially with far-right conservatism growing influence within society at large. But these are not the people that Workers United are targeting; instead, they’re singling out those of us who are afraid of what our next paycheck looks like, and those of us that have the audacity to question SBWU’s actions because of it. Instead of singling out the obvious points of contention, the problem is the baristas living paycheck to paycheck, those of us that can’t afford what they are offering us and forced to work during the duration of the strike. Workers like myself are given no option but to be, what Workers United determines, “scabs”, simply by refusing to strike under their conditions, when they gave baristas no advance notice to prepare for such times and tell us to depend on

unreliable food pantries and COBRA, even while we were under a government shutdown during the weeks prior to the strike.

The most offensive aspect of this strike is that in certain districts, particularly those in college towns, Workers United prioritized getting stores mostly staffed by college students to strike because they know that those baristas are more likely to be supported financially by their families. Baristas from different stores have shared that union baristas outside of some college towns weren’t made aware of the strike at all. Workers United has not only failed working class baristas, it has failed those that they didn’t consider worthy of attention. The representatives of Workers United have made an active effort to exclude certain baristas that they deem useless in the strike and workers without a college education.

The wrongs that Workers United has done to its baristas show us why we need a new, non-corporate, independent labor initiative to represent us. Of particular importance is establishing a movement that is democratic, and to involve the full participation of rank-and-file workers in every step of the strike processes.

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