

december 2024

THE SERVICE WORKER

“Starbucks Workers United Is Not the Answer”



Much attention has been paid to the Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) in the past few years since the first store in Buffalo NY voted to unionize in 2021. Since then, over 400 of Starbucks's 9,000+ stores nationwide have voted to unionize under SBWU, representing around 10,000 employees, who Starbucks amusingly refers to as “partners.” This is part of Starbucks's well-known corporate culture of pretending to be on the worker's side, with statements from former CEO Howard Schultz that it's a “different kind of company.” So different, apparently, that Schultz flew into Buffalo back in 2021 to chastise workers that their union vote was unnecessary.

In the years since, Starbucks under Schultz' executive office has engaged in union busting so rank and vile that even the federal court was forced to admit wrongdoing on Starbucks' part. Between 2021 and 2024, Starbucks had racked up literally hundreds of unfair labor practice lawsuits with the mechanism of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for firing union organizers, slowing down negotiations by demanding in-person negotiation meetings & refusing to offer counter-proposals, informing employees in mandatory meetings that if they unionized they would lose their benefits, tracking employees outside of work, slashing hours at unionized stores, and blacklisting employees from unionized stores from picking up hours at others. Starbucks even provided new benefits and policy relaxations at non-unionized stores, including easing up on the dress code and enabling tips on card instead of just cash.

Where was SBWU in all this? From the very beginning they were organized under Workers United, which is a subsidiary of the state union SEIU (Service Employees International Union). In the three-year period before negotiations even began, SBWU focused its work entirely on union votes at new stores, and simply forwarded all those hundreds of complaints by workers over conditions to the NLRB, and most of these claims still remain unresolved. As of now, they don't even collect dues to raise a strike fund. Between

2021-2024, a total of only three strikes or walkouts occurred at Starbucks.

The first was in 2022 during Pride, when 21 stores spontaneously struck when Starbucks removed Pride messaging to appeal to customers who knocked over Pride displays. The second was Starbucks' Red Cup Day 2022 (which is usually during the holiday season), where around 100 stores struck; and the third was Red Cup Day 2023, when 363 stores struck. In all three cases, the majority of stores that struck didn't even close, as they were staffed by supervisors and scabs from other Starbucks locations. In fact, in Starbucks's 2023 fiscal year report, its revenue rose 12% to a record \$36 Billion, and maintained that figure in its 2024 report. As icing on the cake, SBWU was sued by Starbucks around the time of the last of these “strikes” for mild comments in support of Palestine, and SBWU quickly back-tracked, displaying once again state unions' fundamental alignment with the imperialist system.

In March 2024, negotiations finally did begin. Starbucks stipulated that negotiations had to be in-person, a tactic meant to slow things down, and SBWU completely caved. Delegates to negotiations were elected per-store by the delegates' coworkers, and these delegates travel to huge in-person convention-sized meetings to vote over a ‘foundational framework’ for contracts. Technically, delegates can join virtually, but Starbucks representatives sometimes literally stand up and leave if this is the case.

The content of a ‘foundational framework’ is also intentionally vague. More or less, it relies on coming to an agreement with Starbucks against retaliation, and sets acceptable parameters on both sides of the labor struggle. That is, it imposes the unacceptable limits of the NLRB on the workers, and utilizes nothing else but the NLRB to guarantee the workers the ‘right to organize.’ Only after this process concludes would stores negotiate their contracts on a per-store basis. This kind of dividing up contracts itself is unacceptable, but it gets worse. While little is publicly known about the details of the foundational framework, it is known that

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SBWU unilaterally expelled a delegate from Portland OR in August 2024 for advocating against putting a no-strike clause in the foundational agreement, and refused to admit another delegate from that store.

A no-strike clause is a central piece of the National Labor Relations Act that founded the NLRB, which doesn't allow workers to strike during the period of a contract, deeming any spontaneous “wildcat” strike illegal, and forces the legal state unions to inform the employer when they intend to strike. Obviously this removes the teeth from the strike and places the ball in the companies' court for when strikes become convenient for the company. The ability to strike and to withhold labor is the primary form of leverage and power that workers can have over the company they work under, and the NLRB's purpose is to dull this weapon. This action of expelling this delegate, who was right, is outright treasonous of SBWU, but on par for legal unions. It means in order to organize effectively, in order to wield the strike, the labor movement must abandon the state unions and forge an independent, class-conscious union current in the US.

This is what SBWU had to say about the negotiation process in their September 2024 letter to the new Starbucks CEO Brian Niccol:

“Both sides have engaged in hundreds of hours of bargaining and countless hours of preparation for each session. We have learned a lot about each others' perspectives. We have established a productive working relationship grounded in good faith and professionalism, and we have advanced numerous measures within the framework to address issues faced by Starbucks and partners through the system.”

What ‘good faith’ on Starbucks’ part is SBWU referring to? What ‘perspectives’ do they value? That of class collaboration? The working class movement should be unabashedly biased towards our class and its interests! Finally, what has consisted of SBWU's “actions” during this negotiation process? While delegates are participating in in-person meetings, they ask for “allies” (customers) to go into Starbucks stores on “Red For Bread” days and pass out flyers to non-

union stores to join SBWU!

The results of this outright rejection of the class struggle, reliance on the NLRB to do all the fighting for them, and allowing Starbucks to control negotiations without the threat of a strike should be obvious. In case it isn't, NLRB and SBWU won a federal case that said Starbucks practiced unfair labor practices, and then NLRB issued an injunction (court order) that Starbucks had to reinstate all fired organizers. But Starbucks appealed, and in the June 2024 Supreme Court case Starbucks vs. McKinney, the federal ruling was unanimously overturned. The case also set a precedent that weakens the already compromised and phony institution of the NLRB. Now, when the NLRB makes injunctions it has to prove four criteria: that an injunction would likely succeed on the merits of the case; that the employees would suffer irreparable harm without the injunction; that the balance of equities tipped in the employee's favor; and that an injunction was in the public interest.

As of today's writing, on December 10th 2024, SBWU has entered the “final round” of negotiations to get their “foundational framework.” Will it go through? That is for time to tell; but will it heighten the righteous struggle of Starbucks workers or win their demands of ending understaffing & unpredictable schedules, gaining higher wages, better healthcare, new equipment, and protections against unfair discipline? Certainly not. It is the view of the Service Worker that the Starbucks workers won't get it until they reject SBWU and state unions in general, along with the NLRB, and organize their own union that is class-conscious and independent of the state, one that grasps class struggle as primary and that the weapon of the strike cannot in any way be underestimated or allowed to be suppressed.

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