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THE SERVICE WORKER



“State Unionism Stunted Starbucks Strike”

The five-day Starbucks Worker’s United strike leading up to Christmas ultimately closed down operations at 170 stores out of the 290 that went on strike. SBWU represents now 540+ stores out of Starbucks’ over 17,000. Regarding the impact of the strike in this small fraction of 1% of stores, Sara Kelly, executive VP and CPO had this to say: “The vast majority of our stores (97-99%) will continue to operate and serve customers, and we expect a very limited impact to our overall operations.”

This alone should set off alarm bells to class-conscious workers. But the aftermath of the strike is even more interesting, especially the recent changes made by CEO Brian Niccol. In the month of January 2025, Starbucks has reversed its restroom policy so that only paying customers can use the restroom, among other changes set to “return” to their third-space “coffeehouse” roots and win back customers. This includes bringing back the condiment bar, no longer charging extra for non-dairy milks, and offering ceramic mugs and free refills to customers who stay inside to drink their coffee. Starbucks’ sales declined during all four quarters of 2024, with a 2% overall decline in sales and a 7% decline in quarter four. Whether that was because working people can’t currently afford their coffee amid inflation, because of their union busting, their support for Israel, or a combination of all of the above is ambiguous.

But never mind that this re-gentrification of the Starbucks brand is blatantly out of touch. The most insidious aspect of Niccol’s plan is that it essentially intends to de-skill its barista position. What else can be made of the intention of the push “for most stores to deliver a drink order within four minutes — a plan that includes more and faster machines, improved mobile ordering and digital menu screens” (NPR), taken together with cutting 30% of the menu by the end of 2025? It is true that an increase in the pace of work at the same time as a simplification of the work

overall may not be noticeable from the perspective of an individual worker, while increasing revenue and cutting waste for the capitalist. Workers may even demand better efficiency at their workplace before demanding for a raise, in the circumstance that their failing workplace objectively can’t afford to offer a raise. However, the essential point here is whose hands this kind of efficiency is being applied in the name of — the workers or the capitalists — and for what purpose. And in this case it is definitely in the hands of, and for the purposes of, the capitalist. Are we to naively believe Starbucks CEO Niccol will be using any potential increase in revenue to fund the worker’s just demands? No, increasing the generation of revenue is its main purpose, and its secondary purpose is to make workers more replaceable.

Take that for context when the labor liberals and the bourgeois press laud the recent agreement between Starbucks Workers United and Starbucks to mutually drop all lawsuits against each other. Now that this precondition is met, Starbucks Workers United and Starbucks are going to re-enter negotiations with the help of a mediator. And this is sold as a “win.” How so? Wasn’t the 5-day Christmas strike fundamentally an **unfair labor practice strike**? The devil truly is in the details. Not only were Starbucks Worker’s United’s strikes not directly about demands, but unfair labor practice strikes in order to continue negotiations to receive a *framework* that will be used to make *individual* store contracts; not only could they be considered no more than an opening salvo, a show of strength (of 1-3% of stores), but SBWU voluntarily **gave up** even their ability to conduct unfair labor practice strikes going forward, by dropping all their unfair labor practice lawsuits (over 700)! If this doesn’t prove the impotence of the state unions such as SBWU or its parent Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to the reader, nothing will.

Are you a service worker? We want to hear from you!

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