

Meet the 18-year Kellogg's veteran who's leading workers in a month-long strike that's still going: 'What's at stake here is the American middle class'

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Dan Osborn has worked at Kellogg's for 18 years and he's on strike for the first time. Not only is he one of the 1,400 workers who have been on strike since October 5, he's president of the local union branch in Omaha, Nebraska.

They're the latest group opting to stay on the picket line and demand equitable wages as thousands of workers across the country walk out, turning what the labor movement called #Striketober into #Strikesgiving. Just this week, John Deere union members voted down a tentative agreement, meaning that more than 10,000 workers will stay on strike.

At Kellogg's, workers are demanding an end to what they see as an unfair wage system.

A month after the work stoppage began, bargainers don't seem to be nearing an agreement.

Osborn, who is 46 years old, is ready to keep picketing for as long as it takes.

"We're going to hold our lines throughout the dead of the winter if we have to," he told Insider, and he revealed what it's like to stop working for more than a month in hopes of earning a better deal for yourself and your coworkers.

Going on strike has felt like an 'emotional cocktail'

Kellogg's was one of the several strikes making up what activists termed "Striketober" last month.

"It's exciting to be a part of something bigger than yourself, knowing that we're not alone," Osborn said. "We're a part of a movement now that seems to be sweeping the nation — where the American blue-collar worker just wants what's fair and just in a time of economic growth."

Kellogg's workers on strike in Michigan

But, mixed with feelings of righteousness also comes frustration. Osborn describes it as an "emotional cocktail."

"You know, we worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day through COVID to get Kellogg's to earn their record profits. And we never shut down their plants at all through absenteeism," Osborn said. "That doesn't sit well with our members, the sacrifices that we've made."

He's referring to the \$1.251 billion of net income generated by Kellogg's in 2020, a 25% increase

over the previous year. As profits swelled, so did the pay of CEO Steve Cahillane. His total compensation hit \$11.7 million in 2020, a 20% boost from 2019.

Despite the disconnect, Osborn said that morale is still high due to support from people around the country — and bold-face names in labor and politics, such as Labor Secretary Marty Walsh who visited strikers in Pennsylvania.

"I think we have to realize that every job in America, what people do is essential, and we just have to continue to respect the rights of workers and respect workers moving forward," Walsh told Insider. "If we respect workers moving forward, we will have a stronger economy, and, quite honestly, a stronger country."

Sen. Bernie Sanders sent strikers pizza and a donation and led a letter from several senators calling on Cahillane to reach a fair contract with workers.

'I think we're kind of kicking ass and taking names'

Now, the picketers are gearing up for winter, clad in insulated overalls and fortifying their temporary shelters against the wind.

"If we're going to be here through Thanksgiving and Christmas, that's cold and windy. We're going to have to prepare for that. And the better we prepare for that, the happier our picketers will be," Osborn said.

In the meantime, Bloomberg reports that Kellogg's will start importing cereal from overseas to make up for shortages during the strike. In a statement, the company said that "the union continues to insist on proposals that are unsustainable and unrealistic."

But Osborn sees a larger impact of their movement beyond just the workers out on the picket line.

"As more unions around the country are successful in their contracts you're going to see — and we've already started to see — more people just even locally come to us and say, 'Hey, how do we unionize our shop?'" Osborn said. "'You know, we want what you guys are getting because we feel like we're getting a raw deal.'"

In the meantime, workers will stay on the picket line. Osborn said it's the first time they've done anything like this prolonged action, and are still learning as they go.

"But I think we're kind of kicking ass and taking names," he said.

In the longer term, Osborn said he hopes the legacy is a continuation of what he believes is the American dream: A job that lets you buy a home and raise your kids with ample opportunities.

He said that getting the job at Kellogg's has allowed him to become a homeowner, and for his wife to stay at home to care for their children.

"What's at stake here is the American middle class," Osborn said. "If the middle class keeps getting chipped away, "We're gonna live in a world of rich and poor. And that's not what America is based off of. And that's not what it should be about."