

Immigrant Workers Bring Workers' Rights Concerns to PA Public School Pension Board

NJ bottling plant workers speak to board meeting of the Pennsylvania Public School Employees Retirement System about its investment in the private equity firm that is financing a campaign against their union.

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Screenshots of virtual meeting available in [this Google Drive folder](#).

(Wharton, NJ) — Workers from the Refresco bottling plant spoke to the board meeting of the Pennsylvania Public School Employees Retirement System today about that pension fund's unwitting investment in a union-busting campaign against Refresco's mostly Latin American immigrant workforce. The Pennsylvania public school pension is just one of many public-sector pension funds that invest in PAI Partners, a private equity firm based in Paris that is a co-owner of Refresco, the world's largest independent bottling company.

“My company Refresco is owned by PAI Partners company, which this pension fund is invested in,” said Refresco worker Nelva Castellanos. “You should know that your company, my employer, is fighting the union that the workers voted for.”

Catellanos also described inadequate insurance and poor treatment by supervisors. “Every week I pay \$150 for insurance for my husband and me; I can't afford to put my kids on insurance because it's no good and it's too expensive, so my son and daughter are on NJ CHIP insurance.

“We are treated like animals. Our new supervisor doesn't speak Spanish — and I hear supervisors now calling black people the N-word.”

Anthony Sanchez, a machine operator for 15 years at the NJ Refresco plant, told board members “I am able to join you today because I am currently out of work with an injury that was made a lot worse by the Refresco. The company wouldn't let me off work for medical care, so I had to keep working until I had enough Family Medical Leave Act time accumulated to take time off without losing my job. This took months, and the months I worked with an injury made everything so much worse and I had to get a more serious surgery.

“It's been almost four months since we had our union election, where we voted to form a union. Refresco ran an aggressive anti-union campaign to intimidate and try to silence us, and now is refusing to negotiate with our union.

“Any investors of Refresco should send observers to focus on the management there. Right now the management is a mess. You need to ask yourself if you want to invest in a plant that is not producing enough nor running effectively because of extremely poor management.”

Refresco workers also delivered a [letter from the executive board of UE Local 613](#), which represents teachers and other professionals who work at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children, and whose members are PSERS participants. The letter states that “We do not want our retirement savings funding a fight against other workers,” and asks PSERS to discuss their concerns with PAI Partners and tell them to negotiate a union contract with the Refresco workers.

Refresco workers have also been reaching out directly to other investors in Refresco parent companies, beginning with the Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS) board meeting on September 17, 2021. The workers will also be addressing the board meeting of the Los Angeles County Employees Retirement Association on October 13, and submitting written testimony to the Washington State Investment Board ahead of their October 18 board meeting.

More Information

Refresco workers started organizing their union a year and a half ago to counter abusive treatment by supervisors, low wages, minimal benefits, sexual harassment, constant schedule changes, and an unforgiving attendance system that penalized workers for getting sick. Refresco carried out an intense anti-union campaign prior to the National Labor Relations Board certification election on June 24 and 25, 2021, when a majority of the 250 workers at the plant voted to join the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). Since the election, Refresco has filed a series of frivolous legal appeals to stall bargaining, most of which are complaints about the behavior of its own company observers during the voting process.

Refresco is a Dutch-based transnational corporation that has production facilities in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Mexico. It is the world’s largest independent bottling corporation with a combined production volume of more than 12 billion liters per year. Workers at Refresco in Wharton produce beverages such as BodyArmor Sports Drink for Coca-Cola, Gatorade by Pepsi, Juice Bowl, Arizona Iced Tea, and Tropicana juices and bottle them for shipment to retailers and public school systems in the New York City area and beyond.

This is not the first time PAI Partners has found itself embroiled in a labor dispute involving one of its portfolio companies. In 2019, another PAI Partners’ company, airport concession company Areas, was involved in a labor dispute with hospitality union UNITE HERE. Areas had taken over concessions at several airports and drew criticism from UNITE HERE for not rehiring long-time employees who had been laid off by the previous operator. Another labor dispute between Areas and UNITE HERE in 2020 led two board members of the Los Angeles County Employees Retirement Association (LACERA) to say that LACERA should not reinvest in PAI Partners until the labor dispute was resolved.