

# Unions isolate California supermarket strikers

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The strike by grocery clerks in Southern California is now entering its second week. Seventy-one-thousand workers are either on strike against, or have been locked out by, three supermarket—Vons, Ralph’s and Albertson’s. Managers and strikebreakers are running the 859 markets that are being picketed. At issue is the right of these workers to enjoy decent wages and health and pension benefits.

On the eve of the strike, the leaders of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) declared their willingness to accept concessions that were compatible with employers’ profits. The union rejects the employers’ current proposals only on the grounds that the supermarket chains may be exaggerating their losses.

The UFCW leadership is isolating the strike. Its tactics, relying on consumer boycotts, allow the chains to continue operating. Small groups of pickets at each market plead with customers not to shop at the struck markets, while watching the daily bussing of strikebreakers into the stores and the movement of trucks across the picket line by supermarket managers.

The union bureaucracy has deliberately avoided mass picketing. Northern California supermarket workers, themselves working under a year-old concessions contract, have been kept out of the fray, as have other union markets in Southern California.

These tactics serve only to prolong the strike while demoralizing and wearing down the striking workers. The UFCW leadership insists that they fight with one hand tied behind their back to avoid a political confrontation with the Democratic Party officials with whom the union has intimate ties.

Unless they are defeated, the supermarket chains will impose a contract that creates a lower tier of newly hired workers, working split shifts with reduced wages and benefits and with no pension rights. Veteran workers would have to pay for a large portion of their health care costs, while receiving reduced pensions. The companies would also have the right to further outsource supermarket jobs to non-union vendors and to open non-union supermarkets

under certain conditions.

The supermarket chains are not releasing store sales figures. They claim that they will do whatever it takes to impose their will on the workers. On October 16, Safeway CEO Steven Burd stated that the company hoped to save \$130 million in health care costs over the three-year life of the contract, compared to which the cost of the strike would be “a very small number.”

The UFCW is no stranger to concession contracts, having presided over the transformation of the retail industry from one in which full-time employment was the norm into one that is almost totally dominated by low-wage, part-time workers. Ten years ago, a part-time worker could hope to advance to full-time status within a year of being hired. Today, it is nearly impossible. By using part-time workers, companies cut costs by ensuring that the number of workers correspond as closely as possible to the level of sales throughout the day.

A rally at a market in Hollywood on October 16 brought together between 500 and 700 protesters, less than half of whom were striking workers. Represented at the rally were local bureaucrats from area unions, including the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), Teamsters (IBT) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The two-hour rally provided an audience for several union presidents and city officials. Two of these officials briefly pledged their support for the strikers and, in one case, reminisced about former days as a grocery clerk. Miguel Contreras, the top official in the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, announced that Jesse Jackson would visit the picket lines this week and that AFL-CIO president John Sweeney would attend a rally scheduled for Monday, October 20.

Significantly, not one speaker mentioned the other major strike taking place in the area, that of 2,200 transit mechanics and bus cleaners, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), which has paralyzed the city’s transit system. As in the supermarket struggle, the main issue in the transit walkout is health care benefits. No ATU

representatives were present at the rally, reflecting a conscious decision by the labor bureaucracy to isolate one strike from the other.

To pursue a policy of uniting these two sections of the workers—grocery and transit—to spearhead a struggle for decent living standards, and full health benefits for all, would pose a challenge to the supposed right of big business to subordinate the basic rights of working people to profits. This “right” is just as sacred to the Democrats, with whom the labor bureaucracy is aligned, as it is to the Republicans.

Despite the fact that there were more than enough people present at the rally to shut down the supermarket where it took place, there was no attempt to do so. Had there been, those very same Democratic officials pledging their support for the strikers would have had no hesitation in calling the police against them. On Saturday, October 18, other small rallies took place in La Habra and in Venice—both in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The Venice rally included Democratic presidential hopeful Dennis Kucinich.

The supermarket and transit mechanics’ strikes began less than a week after the recall election that removed California governor Gray Davis from office and replaced him with Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger. This timing underscores both the current state of class relations in California and the treacherous role of the unions.

The campaign among the five top candidates revolved around how best to force the cost of California’s budget crisis onto the backs of working people—either through tax and fee increases affecting the poor and middle class, or through the slashing of state services, the closure of schools and hospitals, the degradation of workers’ compensation and the privatization of state agencies.

None of the major recall candidates have anything to say about the struggle of the supermarket workers, including both Democrat Cruz Bustamante, who presented himself as the liberal alternative to the Republican right and enjoyed the support of California’s trade unions; and Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose rejection of “special interests” obviously does not extend to the supermarket chains and their joint strikebreaking campaign.

Only the Socialist Equality Party-backed candidate, John Christopher Burton, has continued to fight for a program based on defending the needs of workers, a workers’ bill of rights that includes providing adequate health services for all workers in the state both by taking profits out of the health care industry and by taxing corporate profits.

Burton’s program calls upon workers to break with parties of big business, the Democratic and Republican parties, and build the Socialist Equality Party as the socialist alternative that rejects placing profits ahead of human needs.

During the campaign, the California AFL-CIO supported

the Democratic candidates. Thursday’s rally is an indication that it intends at all costs to preserve its relationship to the Democrats and to help restore credibility to this discredited big-business party.

At the rally, Richard, an immigrant worker from a Middle Eastern country, described to the WSWS the conditions facing supermarket workers:

“I have been a Ralph’s employee for seven years as a part-timer, though I work almost 40 hours a week. I make \$13 an hour. Except for the supervisor, who is also a union member, all of the other workers are part-timers. What makes it hard is that my rent is \$1,060 a month to rent an apartment, half or more of what I take home. In a way, I am lucky because I am still single. In some cases, workers with families have to share their apartments with others; some work two part-time jobs.

“It used to be that the markets did not have so many part-timers. It was possible to become full-time in a year, sometimes in six months. Now it is almost impossible. When you hear that someone is making \$18 dollars an hour, divided over 40 hours, his weekly pay is less than \$10 per hour.

“The company says that what we have to pay for medical insurance is not going to be very much, \$5 to \$15 dollars a week. That is a lot, coming on top of everything else. People will have to decide whether to pay the light bill and risk being dropped from their health insurance, or to go without electricity. Many people will end up without medical benefits when they really need them.”

The support from customers for the strikers is being felt everywhere. In some areas, students, workers and housewives have spontaneously joined the picket line and provided refreshments and food for the striking workers.

In the past week, the struck markets have been able to extend their hours of operation, hiring more strikebreakers, and, as in the case of the Kroger chain, importing them from other states. In an attempt to boost sales, the chains have begun an advertising blitz on Spanish-language radio stations in Los Angeles. Most are heavily discounting their prices, particularly on perishable items, such as fruit and meat. Supermarkets that are not being struck report a windfall in new sales.



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