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
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.