

# SEP candidate John Christopher Burton speaks with picketing supermarket workers in Los Angeles

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23 October 2003

Supermarket workers in the second week of a strike/lockout warmly greeted Socialist Equality Party gubernatorial candidate John Christopher Burton when Burton visited picket lines in the Los Angeles area on Tuesday. Burton, a civil rights lawyer in Pasadena, ran as a replacement candidate in the October 7 recall election to provide a socialist alternative to the Democrats and Republicans.

Workers at Vons and Pavillions supermarkets in southern California walked off their jobs on October 11 in opposition to the owners' demands for sweeping concessions in a new contract. Two other major chains, Ralphs and Albertsons, immediately locked out their employees. Some 70,000 workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), are either on strike or locked out in the region.

At a Ralph's store located in the Los Angeles suburb of La Canada more than a dozen locked out workers stood in temperatures exceeding 100 degrees to picket the nearly empty parking lot in front of the store entrance. Inside, strikebreakers hired at hourly rates exceeding those of UFCW workers with decades of seniority stood next to empty cashier lines during what would normally be the late afternoon rush.

Each of the pickets took a copy of the statement issued by Burton declaring his solidarity with both the supermarket workers and striking Los Angeles transit workers [See "John Christopher Burton, socialist candidate in California recall election, declares solidarity with supermarket and transit strikers"] along with the statement of the Socialist Equality Party on the California recall election.

Many workers told Burton they hardly ever saw their union officials at the picket line and expressed concern that the union had not proposed a strategy for winning the dispute. Burton urged the pickets to form their own committees and reach out to workers in other areas of industry and commerce for support. He explained that although their struggle might seem isolated, it was part of a broader attack on health coverage for the working class. All the pickets expressed their agreement.

Burton explained that the workers' contract struggle was in essence a political struggle, and that big business was intent on driving down the standard of living for workers in California and throughout the country. He stressed the importance of mobilizing the working class independently of the two big business parties, both of which refuse to take any action against the unionbusting tactics of the grocery chains.

Burton pointed out that the UFCW leadership had taken no measures to unite their job action with the thousands of striking transit workers represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union. "They fear the independent mobilization of the workers because it threatens their alliance with the Democratic Party," he said. Several of the pickets told Burton that they were sorry they did not vote for him in the recent recall election, and said that they would check out the *World*

*Socialist Web Site.*

Many of the workers were incensed over comments from local right-wing talk show hosts, particularly “John and Ken” from KFI 640 and Larry Elder and Al Rantel from KABC 790. Doreen Bennett, a cashier with 29 years experience, told Burton, “I don’t appreciate people saying that I don’t have a real job. I have a daughter in college and a son who is 32. I raised them by working full time at this market. Now they want to make us pay half of our health expenses. I can’t imagine if this had occurred ten or fifteen years ago what I would have done to make the home and car payments due every month.”

Bennett explained how the lockout began at her store, which belongs to Kroger Company. “Workers were told to go home at 9:00 p.m. one night. The next shift showed up in the morning, all dressed and ready to work, and was sent home.” She expressed concern because “there are no talks scheduled with the holiday season only weeks away.” She suggested that other workers should join their fight. “Teachers, firefighters, everyone who understands what happens when we go weeks without a paycheck should support our struggle.”

Mark Meshkat told Burton that he has worked for Ralph’s as a cashier for 19 years, yet the company won’t make him full-time because it wants the flexibility to cut his hours below 40 a week. Meshkat said that the main issue in dispute was health care coverage.

“90 billion dollars is going to Iraq,” he said, “but they cannot spend the money on health care here. Food, shelter, education and health care—these should be basic human rights that the government insures for all people. If everybody had those, maybe we would have a better society.”

Meshkat praised the many customers who have stopped by the picket lines to show their support. One dropped off a professionally prepared poster showing the millions of dollars Kroger’s top management are sucking out of the company in annual salary and stock options.

Jennifer Gates, a checker who moonlights as an accomplished jazz vocalist at local venues, provided the WSWs with a copy of the grocery companies’ latest “Offer of Settlement.” She denounced the provision allowing the companies to open non-union stores

wherever their market share is less than 25 percent, along with a proposed two-tier wage structure and cuts in benefits.



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