

Union moves to weaken California grocery workers' struggle

Don Knowland
5 November 2003

On October 31, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) pulled more than 18,000 workers off picket lines at Ralphs supermarkets in southern California. This back-stabbing action by the UFCW leadership was designed to further isolate striking and locked-out workers and pave the way for a contract settlement containing sweeping concessions in health and pension benefits, work rules and compensation.

UFCW Local 770 president Rick Icaza attempted to justify the move as an effort to maintain public support for the 70,000 striking and locked-out workers: "What we're doing is rewarding our consumers who have respected our picket lines," he said. Icaza added that the union's dispute was mostly with Vons and Pavilions, which are owned by the Safeway supermarket giant, rather than the two other chains involved in the strike/lockout—Ralphs (a subsidiary of Kroger) and Albertsons.

Ralphs and Albertsons locked out their workers and joined the Safeway subsidiaries to form a united front immediately after Local 770 stuck Safeway on October 11. Safeway chairman Steven Burd has told industry analysts that the three chains agreed to share the financial burden from the strike. This means, as Icaza knows, that any revenue gained by Ralphs from increasing sales will benefit not only Ralphs, but Safeway and Albertsons as well.

A Ralphs spokesperson said the chain had no intention of ending its lockout: "We are united with [Safeway] and Albertsons through this labor dispute as long as the union may decide to continue it."

In announcing the decision to remove pickets from the Ralphs stores, Icaza said the UFCW was considering picketing Safeway stores nationwide. Were the union to carry through this threat—for the purpose of

mollifying angry workers and covering its betrayal—it would limit such action to token, informational picketing.

Public support for the strike, now in its fourth week, has remained strong, with sales down 75 percent at the supermarket chains. Until the pickets were pulled at Ralphs, relatively few shoppers were patronizing any of the chains involved in the dispute. The UFCW action will encourage consumers to resume shopping not only at Ralphs, but, in short order, at the other chains as well.

On Sunday, a WSWS reporting team spoke to Ralphs workers who had been reassigned to picket a Pavilions store in Burbank. All were uniformly critical of the union's move, viewing it as a weakening of the strikers and their unity.

Lorena said, "Nothing good is going to come of it. [The union leaders] are not respecting us. We have to support each other. Suddenly, the store is full of people who wouldn't cross our picket lines before. Ralphs is getting a lot of money to hold out against us. The tactic is self-defeating. They are doing business and we are here. It makes no sense. In fact, it is a stab in the back.

"We need to pressure the union to let us picket back at Ralphs. It is kind of like the union wants us to lose quickly and give up. It is like we don't have any say."

The WSWS spoke to other Ralphs workers at a Vons market in Pasadena. They expressed similar misgivings about the UFCW pulling down the pickets at Ralphs. "The union held a meeting of picket captains last Thursday and announced what they called a 'change in strategy,'" Phelan Fernandez said. "It doesn't make any sense to me. I'd like to see the strike get bigger, not smaller."

Fernandez, a father of two with eight years' seniority, said the lockout was particularly difficult for his family

because his wife had been laid off by Disney Stores two months ago. “She was laid off because of lowered sales, but I was locked out even though our store is doing better than ever.”

The Ralphs workers picketing at the Burbank Pavilions also roundly criticized the union’s failure to communicate with them concerning strike developments or develop a viable strategy for the strike. According to Lorena, the union representative “only comes by every once in a while.” She added, “Frankly, a lot of us don’t really know what’s going on. What we tell her goes in one ear and out the other.”

A younger worker, Pancho, said, “I saw our president Rick Icaza on television. He was talking too much baloney. There was nothing about how we are going to win.”

A Pavilions worker interviewed by the WSWS in Burbank on October 26 elaborated on this view: “Look, there’s a lot of disinformation from the leaders. They are not keeping us informed. We get bits and pieces. We really have poor communication. We get the union paper every month and what does it talk about? About the scholarships it’s giving students. About all the money it’s investing. But we were never really prepared for this strike.

“A lot of us don’t really know what’s going on. The only ones who get screwed here are the workers. The company and the union, they both know how the strike is going to end. The union will start by giving up some things. In the end, it will sign a contract and tell us it was all it could do. We will get screwed. It’s just a question of how much.”

Matt, a Burbank Pavilions retail sales manager with 15 years of experience, said the strike was “obviously a national issue.” He continued: “For years the stores have been cutting hours, increasing duties and demanding wage and benefit concessions. All workers, such as transit workers and grocery workers in Los Angeles, are being hit hard. We need national-type strikes, and beyond just our industry. Everybody is struggling to make ends meet, so the working class needs to take action to shut down the whole system.

“The strike’s been a growing and learning experience. It causes you to evaluate your life. The dissatisfaction of the working class is growing. To win, the working class needs to effect a change in the economic structure.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact