

Talks break down in Southern California supermarket strike

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Negotiations to resolve the strike/lockout involving 70,000 Southern California grocery workers ended abruptly Sunday night after six days of meetings. Federal mediator Peter Hurtgen issued a statement that he “will ask the parties to return to the table when I determine that it might be fruitful to resume face-to-face discussions.”

The workers, whose bargaining agent is the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), are entering their third month on the picket line in a contract struggle with the major supermarket chains. The strike has reached a critical stage with the Christmas holidays approaching and the workers’ health benefits set to expire at the end of December.

Clerks employed by Safeway, Inc., which owns the Vons and Pavilion supermarket chains, struck on October 11 over the company’s demand that a new contract require workers to pay health insurance premiums as well as substantial co-payments—up to 50 percent for surgeries and other expensive procedures. In addition, Safeway wants the new contract to include a low-wage, two-tier system for new hires.

Under a joint agreement with Safeway, the two other major Southern California supermarket chains, Krogers, which owns Ralphs supermarkets, and Albertsons, locked out UFCW members at their stores. All three chains are continuing operations with strikebreakers.

Because of strong public support for the grocery workers, the chains have incurred substantial losses during the strike. Albertsons reported its third quarter figures Friday, revealing \$132 million in lost revenue in the last 19 days of October.

However, the policies of the UFCW and AFL-CIO have weakened the workers’ leverage. On October 31, the UFCW leadership removed picket lines from

Ralphs stores, even though they continue to be operated by strikebreakers. The union officials claimed the tactic would increase pressure on Safeway and split the companies. This rationalization is fraudulent, since the three supermarket giants have agreed to share revenues during the contract dispute.

The UFCW sponsored several days of informational picketing at Safeway markets in Northern California and Washington, D.C., a token gesture aimed at bolstering flagging confidence among the striking and locked-out workers in the union leadership, rather than winning the strike.

On November 24, the UFCW posted pickets at the companies’ distribution centers. Presently, more than 8,000 members of the Teamsters union are respecting those picket lines, refusing to load the trucks or deliver products to the stores. However, this work is being carried out by strikebreakers. Previously, the Teamsters operated the warehouses and drove to the stores, but did not pull the rigs into the loading docks.

Neither the stationing of pickets at the Southern California distribution centers nor the token picketing of stores in other cities alters the basic policy of the UFCW of keeping the Southern California workers isolated and refusing to mount a serious struggle to mobilize strong support for the strike in the working class to halt the strikebreaking.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to UFCW pickets at a Vons supermarket in Pasadena.

Lloyd Kinitake, a dairy manager with 30 years at Vons and a picket captain, admitted he was confused by the UFCW’s tactics. “We were told that the pickets were removed from Ralphs because Steve Burd and Safeway are the real problem. We wanted to give our customers a place to shop without crossing our lines here at Vons. But now that we know the companies are

sharing revenues during the strike, this strategy doesn't seem to make sense anymore."

Kinitake attributed the demand for concessions to losses sustained by Safeway because of Burd's acquisitions. "Safeway paid \$1.8 billion for Dominick's a few years ago, and now it's valued at \$400 million on Safeway's books. Most of us spell Burd with a 'T,' " Kinitake said.

Jackie Hilson, a courtesy clerk with two years' experience, explained, "On the job, my base wage is only \$7.40 an hour, and they only give me 30 hours a week. I need the health plan, though, because I have a three-month-old child. If this strike is not settled by the end of the year, I'll have to go to the county [welfare department] for health coverage for my family. I won't have any choice."

Hilson was very critical of the UFCW leadership. "They pay us \$40 a day for six hours of picketing. That's less than minimum wage. We were getting \$40 for four hours. Now, they're talking about reducing our picketing from five days to three. I can't survive now on \$200 a week."

Hilson said the union was not keeping the workers informed about what was being done to win the strike, and that union officials were abusive. "They do nothing but give us a bunch of rules to follow. I don't understand why they won't let our family members and friends picket with us. The union rep, her name is Cathy, has an attitude. We ask for information and she won't tell us anything. Because of her, some of my co-workers have gotten disgusted with the union. Either they're looking for work somewhere else or crossing the line here and working as scabs."

Hilson also complained about pickets being abused. "There's this manager in our store, Mark Gambling, who comes out every hour and gives us a hard time. Once he broke a sign and spit on the ground where we were picketing. Our union reps want us to talk to the few people who are crossing the line to shop, but sometimes they flip us off or say 'F-k you.' I think the reps should come out here and try speaking to people themselves rather than cutting our pay and giving us a bunch of stupid rules to follow. What I really want the union to do is help us win this strike."

There has been an increase in hostile actions against pickets as the strike has worn on. The most serious incidents occurred on November 9, when striking

supermarket workers were assaulted in two separate incidents.

Witnesses reported seeing four people in a car pull up to a Vons supermarket in Palm Springs at about 8 p.m. and start a fight with the strikers. After an attacker fired three rounds from a .25-caliber pistol, the group fled. Police stopped the car and arrested the four occupants.

Gilberto Ruvalcaba, a UFCW member for two-and-a-half years, described a separate incident in Orange County to a WSWs reporter: "It was about 10:15 Sunday evening. The store closed at 10. There were six pickets here. Then about six teenagers, all dressed in black gothic clothes, started yelling racial slurs at us as they entered, banging their baseball bats on the ground.

"They said, 'Where's the Mexicans? Where's the black people?' They were using really bad words. They were walking around the parking lot making themselves into a group, shouting, 'Hey, you with the glasses. Come over here. We want to fight.'

"Two of the security guards stood in front of our picket line. Then they dropped their bats and got closer, spitting at us. Then one of them hit one of the pickets. We all rushed to get him away, and that's when one of the security guards hit one of the kids with a flashlight, warning him not to get closer.

"One of them shouted back, 'You're so dead! I'm going to hit you with my baseball bat.' That's when the security guard fired a warning shot so they wouldn't think it was fake. Most of them backed away. One said, 'Shoot me! I don't care if I die!' The other one broke our stereo and chairs. Then one guy drove up in a truck and told them to get out of here. One of them shouted that the cops had arrived, and they ran off. Two were arrested and released to their parents."



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