

New England supermarket unions approve new contract

Mike Ingram
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Membership meetings of UFCW locals representing supermarket workers in three New England states voted Sunday to accept a new contract with Stop & Shop Supermarket Co., ending three months of talks and the threat of strike action.

The union announced a tentative agreement the day before the meetings, stating that it would be recommending the contract, which they hailed as safeguarding health care benefits and pensions, while providing general wage increases.

The company employs 36,000 workers represented by five union locals in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. About 80 percent are part-time workers, some of whom earn the minimum wage. More than 30 percent of the part-time workforce is made up of so-called career part-timers with two or more years of service.

The previous contract expired February 20, and workers in all three states unanimously endorsed strike authorization. The union immediately agreed to a one-week extension of negotiations and then a further extension when no agreement had been reached by February 27.

During this time, while the union told workers to continue working without a contract, their employer was preparing for a bitter struggle. A February 14 article in the *Berkshire Eagle* noted that Stop & Shop had begun hiring temporary workers to be used as scabs in the event of a strike.

The article cites company spokeswomen Faith Weiner, who said the hiring session was part of a “contingency plan” in case a work stoppage occurred. “We have an obligation and a responsibility to our customers,” Weiner said. In a clear attempt to intimidate workers, the temporary jobs were widely advertised in local papers and on the Internet.

Following the vote, UFCW Local 1445 spokesman Jim Carvalho told the *Boston Globe*, “Through the hard work

of our negotiators, we were able to reach an agreement that maintained our great health and pension benefits and provided general wage increases.”

But some of the workers who gathered for the meeting at a function hall in Randolph, located just south of Boston, were angry that a portion of the pay increases for this year had been replaced by a signing payment and the increases themselves were negligible.

Andrea Fay, a bakery worker who voted for the contract, said, “It’s not that great, but I can’t afford to strike, I’d lose my home. I’ve been doing this for 20 years. The company is going to give you what they want to.”

Brian said there was good and bad in the contract. “The wage rate is not good, especially for the part-timers. I think all the wages could be higher.”

The wage increases are indeed paltry. Full-time weekly employees will receive a \$750 signing bonus and a wage increase totaling \$1.15 an hour over the course of the three-year contract. That figure includes a 25-cent an hour pay raise this year, beginning in August.

Part-time workers with more than two years of service will receive a \$400 signing bonus, and a total 60-cent per hour increase over three years. But their first raise of 30 cents per hour is not due until March next year, with a further 30 cents per hour in 2012.

Part-timers with 12 to 24 months of service will get a \$300 signing bonus next week and a total 55-cent per hour increase: 25 cents per hour in March 2011 and a 30 cent per hour hike in March 2012. Those with less than 12 months service will receive a \$100 signing bonus and a 25-cent per hour raise in 2011 and a further 25-cent an hour raise in 2012.

Under the new contract there will be no extra health care costs for this year, but from March 2011 there will be increases of between \$12 and \$20 per month for all full- and part-time employees. The rate of increase will depend on the cost of current policies, and the increases will remain in place for the next three years.

Many of the part-time employees had hoped the contract negotiations would provide an opportunity to improve their working conditions. Gary Little is a part-time worker at the Stop & Shop in Watertown, Mass. "For part-timers it's crap," he said of the contract. "I work part-time. We have to wait until Fridays to get our schedule. You can't plan anything, like a doctor's appointment. How can you make an appointment for the next Monday when you don't know what days and hours you'll be working? Everything's up in the air.

"There's a big difference in wages between full- and part-time. I would rather be working full-time. There's too much flexibility. You don't know what your hours are going to be. You could be working 10 or 25 hours. You can't budget for the following week.

"The most you can get is 30 hours, but that rarely happens. The only time is around the holidays, when they really need you.

"The union is not doing very great for the part-timers. I would say 80 to 85 percent are part-time at Stop & Shop. I've never been in a union this big before, but I think they should be working a lot harder for us. It takes about three to five years to become full-time.

"For me right now, I would have to be there three years to even get partial disability or to even get health care."

Stop & Shop was acquired by Ahold, one of the largest food retailers in the world, with around 450,000 employees worldwide. The company's last earnings report on January 21 this year said net sales had increased 10 percent over the previous year to \$4.4 billion.



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