

Southern California grocery workers authorize strike

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Last week, 62,000 baggers, checkers and butchers in the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike against Vons, Albertsons, and Ralph's grocery stores in Southern California. This vote was successful despite efforts by the Democratic Party and the labor bureaucracy to discourage a strike. It is a sign of growing opposition nationwide among workers to attacks on their living standards.

The UFCW strike vote is particularly explosive because it sets the workforce on a collision course with California Democratic Governor Jerry Brown, who came into office with the full support of the UFCW and the trade unions as a whole. The labor bureaucracy has joined Brown in insisting that the economic crisis in the state demands that workers "sacrifice" in the interest of ensuring the fiscal health of the treasury and keeping large corporations "competitive"—that is, ensuring they continue to make enormous profits.

The strike vote was prompted by a series of brutal demands from management, including eliminating employee HMOs, increasing workers' share of health premiums, cutting back on pension benefits, and ending overtime benefits for employees who work seven days a week. Full-time employees at these grocery stores currently earn less than \$30,000 a year, a poverty wage in Southern California, which is notorious for its extremely high cost of living.

During the last fiscal year, the three supermarket corporations posted operating profits of \$4.5 billion. In 2009, Steven A. Bund, the CEO of Safeway LLC, David B. Dillon, the CEO of Ralph's parent company, the Kroger Corporation, and Craig R. Herbert, the CEO of Supervalu Inc., which owns Albertsons, each made over \$10 million.

They are intent on using the present economic crisis

to fully transform the grocery industry into a low-wage sector, a goal they have been pursuing for years.

Despite the express desire of grocery workers to oppose the demands of these wealthy corporations, the UFCW leadership has made it clear that it does not want a strike.

In an interview on area radio station KPCC, UFCW Local 770 President Ricardo Icaza made it clear that he is staunchly opposed to collective action. Addressing himself almost apologetically to corporate management and in clear opposition to the sentiment of those he purportedly represents, Icaza declared, "We absolutely do not want to strike."

"I felt ... we had passed the era of the need for strikes. I thought those days were over," he lamented.

Mickey Kasparian, president of UFCW Local 135, echoed these views, indicating that the scale of the economic crisis in California meant that this was not a time when workers should try to defend their wages and benefits.

"We don't want to inconvenience the public. We don't want our members out on the picket lines. Times are tough today. The economy is not exactly at the healthiest," he said.

Grocery workers should take careful note of what their trade union leaders are saying. The labor bureaucracy is openly opposed to a struggle in their interests. As it has in the past, in the event that the UFCW leadership is forced by union sentiment to call a strike, it will do everything in its power to quickly bring workers to heel and sell out any labor action.

At the end of 2003, UFCW workers went on strike in opposition to efforts to impose a two-tier wage system and plans to force workers to pay 50 percent of their health care costs. The workers held out for five months

until the UFCW leadership capitulated to the draconian demands of corporate management. They were sent back to work defeated and demoralized, with the labor bureaucracy insisting nothing more could have been done.

Over the course of the strike, the UFCW leadership pulled picketers from storefronts in a cowardly show of “good faith” towards corporate leadership, instructed members to shop at stores that had locked out union workers and replaced them with scabs, and refused to make any appeal to broad layers of working people for joint action in defense of living standards. In short, they prepared a defeat.

After the UFCW leadership sheepishly caved in to nearly all of management’s demands in February 2004, the mega-chains retaliated by firing 630 UFCW organizers for “misconduct.”

The UFCW leadership enjoys a highly privileged position relative to its working class membership. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Local 770 President Icaza earned \$273,404 in 2002, the last year for which salary information is available. The presidents of the six UFCW locals involved in the 2003-04 dispute all made more than \$95,000 in 2002. Several other Southern California UFCW executive committee members had salaries topping \$100,000.

However, the UFCW’s opposition to a strike is not simply a function of the privileged position of its leadership. The union, like its counterparts nationwide, is a fulsome supporter of the Democratic Party, including Governor Jerry Brown at the state level and President Barack Obama at the national level.

In California, Brown is carrying out a sweeping assault on working people’s living standards, gutting public funding for social programs and education, and seeking to roll back state employee pensions. He is relying on the support of the trade union bureaucracy to carry out these attacks and block the emergence of mass popular opposition to his policies.

The UFCW is opposed to strike action by their membership because they are concerned, particularly given recent events in Wisconsin and other states across the US, that it could become a focal point for an outpouring of popular discontent over the brutal demands of big business and the entire political establishment in California.

The Democratic Party, which the UFCW supports with regular donations, enjoys close financial connections to Vons, Albertsons, and Ralph’s. Through a variety of Political Action Committees (PAC), the three companies give hundreds of thousands of dollars of support to the Democrats, as well as the Republicans.

In 2010, for example, Kroger’s PAC gave generously to both Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. SuperValu PAC spent \$222,500 buying politicians in the 2010 election cycle, a majority (58 percent) of which went to Democrats. Safeway PAC, which spent a total of \$755,232 during the 2010 cycle, split its support 50-50 between the Democrats and Republicans. And the list goes on.

The *World Socialist Web Site* supports all workers who enter into struggle to defend and improve their living and working conditions. However, a warning must also be sounded: no successful struggle can or will be waged by the UFCW, which serves only to handcuff workers to management and the Democratic Party.

Rank-and-file committees of grocery workers must be formed to wage a struggle independent of both the unions or the Democrats. Employees at the grocery chains must appeal to broad masses of people throughout California and across the nation for support, calling on them to mobilize in defense of their own jobs and living standards. A struggle can only be won if it is waged not only in opposition to the demands of the giant supermarket chains, but against the subordination of the entire economy to the profit interests of big business.



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