UFCW prepares betrayal of California supermarket workers

A WSWS reporting team
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Southern California affiliates of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) are currently involved in contract negotiations with the Vons, Ralphs and Albertsons supermarket chains. Negotiations have currently reached an impasse with the union using the opportunity to stage protest rallies outside the headquarters and individual store locations of the chains.

The two parties successfully reached an agreement last month on pensions which severely roll back benefits for grocery workers. The UFCW accommodated a June 30 deadline required by the supermarket to reach the pension agreement.

Said Rick Icaza, president of the largest UFCW local involved in the negotiations, "We've compromised to retain the most crucial portions of our pension plan while helping management save money. This not only preserves our pension fund but also shows our willingness to work towards a fair solutions for all parties."

The conglomerates are also demanding other rollbacks in workers' health care, wages and other benefits. An average grocery worker at one of the chains makes only $25,000 per year and the changes to health care benefits alone will increase employee deductibles, contributions, co-pays and prescriptions costs.

The last overall agreement expired on March 6 with those affected grocery workers working without a contract ever since. On April 21, union workers voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike authorization.

Union heads have been very clear, however, that a strike is the last thing they want.

Vons spokesman Daymond Rice said of the rallies and the union's willingness to strike, "These rallies appear to be part of a playbook and have no bearing on the bargaining. I don't have a sense that [the negotiations] are more contentious than before."

The last time the UFCW went on strike in California was October 2003. Despite widespread public support at the time, the union leaders worked tirelessly to isolate the rank-and-file members and undermine their own pickets. After 19 weeks they agreed to a new contract that cut pensions and benefits while increasing employee contributions, and which also created a two-tier wage system under which new hires were brought on with less wages and benefits than their predecessors.

The last contract approved by the UFCW in 2007 effectively kept the 2003 contract in place, making only cosmetic changes to the implemented two-tier wage system. The UFCW leadership in conjunction with the supermarket chains is now looking to force even deeper concessions on its workers with the economic recession used as a convenient pretext.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* talked to several young grocery workers about working conditions and their attitude to a potential strike. Most preferred to remain anonymous.

At one Ralphs, the effects of the 2003 contract were on full display. One college-age young woman said that despite working there for the past three years she had never received a raise and was still making $8 an hour.

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She is usually only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours a week and union dues take as much as $40 from each paycheck.

When it comes the proposed concessions under negotiation, her coworker, a high school student, said that he felt sorry for the older workers with families “because they can’t afford to have any more money taken out of their paycheck.”

At a Vons store a young woman, Arianna, who makes $8.30 an hour, spoke to our reporters about the situation at her store. “I feel like I don’t get paid enough for what I do. In the bakery, it’s not so hard. But in the deli, it’s tiring work. It’s one of the most tiring jobs at the store. Maybe the meat department is more work. But no one knows how much we really do. We have to lift really heavy boxes of meat. Everything has to be out at a certain time. You get totally chewed out by management if the store isn’t a certain way.”

Even under the expired contract, Arianna can’t afford the $20 per pay period it would take to join the store’s health plan and the situation is only going to get worse. At stake in the current negotiations are increases to the maximum out-of-pocket expenses for the health plan and increased employee contributions.

With the average full-time employee at these stores earning around $20,000 a year, it makes no significant difference whether the maximum out-of-pocket is increased to $11,000, as the union claims, or only $8,000 according to the corporations, either one would be ruinous to workers.

On the question of a possible strike, Arianna contended that she and her fellow workers were more than willing, but were disappointed in the union’s position and lack of forthright communication with them.

“I feel like both sides are dragging it out way longer than is necessary. We’ll come to work and they might say, ‘oh we’re going on strike today!’ Then they say, ‘we might go on strike.’ You know, for a worker, who really hates their job, it’s the most exciting thing to think that we can just walk away from our jobs and pick sides and go out there and fight for everything. And then it turns out that it doesn’t happen, or we have to wait till midnight or we have to wait till the next month. And it’s just frustrating. They keep postponing.”

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