

California grocery workers speak ahead of strike vote

David Brown
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Grocery workers at three major chains in Southern California have begun voting on whether to authorize a strike. The vote, conducted on Friday and Saturday, covers seven United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union locals, with 62,000 members at Ralphs, Vons and Albertsons supermarkets between Santa Barbara and the Mexican border.

The supermarket chains have so far demanded major concessions in health benefits, including increases to the minimum workers have to pay before their insurance covers anything. This assault on grocery workers, who only make \$20,000 a year on average, follows last year's profits of \$4.5 billion for these companies. The proposed cuts come after a long line of concessions that the UFCW has already given to the stores.

Although UFCW members voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike in April, only one month after their contract expired, the union bureaucracy never intended to follow through. At the time, Rick Icaza, the president of UFCW Local 770, said in a radio interview with KPCC: "I think the employers are going to look at this and say to themselves, 'We have the authority to go forward,' and instead of what they've been doing in the past—stalling—they're going to sit down and bargain in good faith."

Almost four months later without a contract, the UFCW is still unwilling and incapable of putting up a serious fight to maintain the standard of living of their rank-and-file members. After the last scheduled negotiations ended on Wednesday without even a contract proposal, Icaza maintained that enough had changed that they needed a new vote to authorize a strike. At the same time he complained, "What's on the table is unacceptable. The fact that there's not even a complete proposal to vote on is even more

unacceptable."

With the strike vote only days away the one demand on Local 770's web site is that the supermarkets "conclude these negotiations quickly and fairly." Like the unions involved in the Verizon strike, the UFCW is unwilling to demand concessions from the employers.

By keeping contract negotiations secret and never giving a specific answer about what the strike will be for, the unions are hoping to quickly demoralize their members during any industrial action and present whatever backroom deals they make as victories.

While the UFCW is pretending to pursue "fair negotiations," Albertsons and Vons are taking the potential for a strike much more seriously and are already hiring scabs. These supermarket chains hope to repeat their success in 2003, when Icaza and other union functionaries undermined the striking workers by refusing to broaden the struggle, calling off the picket of Ralphs, and allowing out-of-state UFCW members to work as strikebreakers.

Since the 2003 strike, the proportion of part-time employees has skyrocketed while the number of grocery workers who can afford the health plan has plummeted.

Paul, a part-time worker at Ralphs, described the situation to our reporters: "The company treats us like slaves. We are nothing but numbers for them, they don't even see us as human beings.

"I'm young and I have this as a part-time job, 24 hours a week. If I lose it, ok, hopefully I'll find something else. But I feel sorry for some of my co-workers who gave their working lives to this company. After 20-25 years, what do they have to look forward to? They have families to feed, what about them? How

can they afford education or anything else, a future?

“If a strike is voted, my situation is so precarious I’ll have to quit and find something else. A strike could go on for two-three months and I simply don’t have backup resources, I’ll need to make enough money to live. The unions give us nothing. They are absolutely no good. They don’t even come around to see how we’re doing. Actually, they are good for something: once in a while they give us theater tickets, that’s about it. Ridiculous.

“With what’s been happening on the stock market, what I see is that they will try to push us even lower. And right now we’re really low. We can barely live with the salary we make.”

Jeff, an Albertsons employee for 32 years, said, “Thirty years ago if you were 16 you could make a decent living working part-time for a grocery store. Not anymore. The killer part about working here was the benefit package, which meant you could provide for your family. That’s why people stayed.”

After the 2003 strike, the union agreed to large concessions and the creation of a two-tiered wage system so that new hires could be paid less.

“At some point,” Jeff added, “management realized they could become billionaires overnight if they got rid of our health care plans. They’re really pushing the two-tier system because a \$20-an-hour person has to work harder to maintain their job, while someone working \$8 an hour, if they don’t like their job, can just go somewhere else.”

Like many other workers, Jeff knows that the union isn’t on his side. “The UFCW is going to worry about the UFCW. The 2003 lockout showed you’re just a name and a number.”



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