

Los Angeles grocery workers speak on strike vote

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On Friday and Saturday, southern California members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) voted overwhelmingly for the second time in five months to authorize strike action against the three largest regional supermarket chains, Ralphs, Albertsons and Vons.

The vote, which took place at various locations throughout Southern California, was carried by 90 percent, well above the two thirds majority requirement for strike authorization. Workers were told that a second strike authorization was necessary, as the proposed agreement, which includes sharp cuts in benefits, had changed slightly since April.

The supermarket conglomerates have already made ample preparations for a strike. Albertsons and Vons have announced that they are taking applications for temporary workers. At the same time, the supermarket chains know that they can rely on the UFCW to contain and isolate any strike action, as was done in 2003.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed copies of a statement opposing the demands of the company. The statement calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to fight against the attack, and the building of a socialist movement of the entire working class. (See “The way forward for California grocery workers”)

Workers participating in a vote in Burbank, California on Saturday expressed enormous anger and frustration with the supermarket chains and the UFCW alike.

William, who has been working for Ralphs since 1990, said, “The UFCW slogan is ‘I don’t want to strike, but I will if I have to’. Well, we agree, but for a lot of us it’s not a question of ‘if.’ We simply need to do it.

“Yes, in 2003, we lost. But the bottom line is, if we fight we may lose, but if we don’t fight, we’re guaranteed to lose.”

Asked if he thought that the UFCW could wage a successful struggle against the grocery chains, William said, “I’m sorry to say it, but I really don’t think so. In 2003 I saw Teamsters trucks crossing our picket lines to make deliveries. The UFCW didn’t say a word about it. This time around, they’re practically bending over backwards to please the supermarkets. We gave them strike authorization in April. They should have struck then. At the time, this was supposed to send the chains the message that we were serious. Four months later with no strike, how serious do they think we are now?”

Dana has worked in general merchandising at Ralphs for more than 17 years.

“I voted ‘no’ [on the chains’ current proposal] because corporate is greedy. I can’t afford \$9 more per month for health care. They are greedy. They always want more from us. It’s time to stand up against them and say no more.

“We don’t believe the union really represents us, but we also feel like we have no choice. We have to work together with SAG and Teamsters and all other unions. If we work together we can force them to pay. But we don’t work together. There is no coordination.

“We as grocery workers, like all other workers, work hard and should be paid top dollar. I can’t afford any more cuts. Where is the American dream? I’m living a nightmare. In 2003, I had money saved for a house. It’s gone, and I filed for bankruptcy. Now I can’t get by on what I’m paid. \$300 per week is a poverty wage.”

Deena came all the way from her home in Castaic—an hour and a half drive from Burbank—to vote. She was accompanied by her husband Keith.

Deena said, “I don’t like the supermarket’s position

one bit. They are trying to take too much away from us.”

Asked about the union’s role in the 2003 strike in which she participated, Deena said, “It was six months on the picket line, and then we got nothing. The supermarket chains got everything. It’s the same today. The union isn’t there for us. The union never came to my store. I never got any information about what was happening with the negotiations, and I’m not getting any information now either.”

Her husband Keith said, “The vote isn’t fair because neither the supermarkets nor the unions have given Deena specific information about the health care proposal. I don’t know why they aren’t giving out specific details, especially since the union says the grocery stores have a proposal, but the union won’t give details until they know how the membership voted today.”

Asked about this thoroughly undemocratic maneuver on the part of the UFCW, Keith said, “They want to confuse and hurt us.”

David is a long time worker for the Vons supermarket chain. “This deal is unacceptable,” he said. “When I started working for Vons, I was motivated. I saw in this as a great opportunity for a better life, a future, the chance to improve my economic situation. My hopes were shattered by reality though.

“I’ve been making the same amount of money since 2005. No incentives, no bonuses, no reward for the hard work you do. On the contrary. The pressure on workers is unbearable.

“The workplace is a miniature police state. Disciplinary actions have become the norm. Workers are working in conditions of continuous fear. You feel threatened every moment, you might lose your job if you don’t ascribe to the strict rules of management.

“Months ago I was fired. Due to a sudden labor shortage in my department, I had to do the work of three people. This forced me to work on my off day. This seems hardly credible, but that was the basis of them firing me: I was working at a time I was not scheduled. Only when they felt threatened with a lawsuit, they re-hired me.

“The unions don’t help. Politicians don’t help. Obama is no different from the rest. What are our

options? Socialism is always depicted as a bad word. I don’t have a problem with it, in fact I want to know more about it.”

The WSWs also spoke with Alfonso, a 20-year veteran in the grocery industry. “I’ve been working in grocery stores for 20 years. I’ve seen several struggles. The one in 2003 was a defeat. We lost some of our benefits, especially pensions, health care.

“New hires get paid a pittance that’s comparable to minimum wage, plus they are now capped off at \$15/hr. That means you have nowhere to go, there’s no future there. You can’t live on such wages.

“The conditions in the workplace are close to a military supervision. In the past, we discovered that Vons hired camera crews that would literally check on workers for the specific purpose of firing them. In such conditions, you feel threatened continuously. At times we feel at a loss because we can’t trust anyone.

“The unions pose as our friends, but I’m not too sure, considering the past defeats. Plus, there are too many things we are not told about that are happening in these negotiations.”

Lin, also a long time grocery worker, said, “We are told by the union that the company moves quicker if we don’t strike. But it seems the opposite to me. These negotiations are going nowhere.

“We already authorized the strike in April with an overwhelming 90 percent of the votes. Why are we voting again on the same item? Why is the union holding us off? I’m not sure about their role. I think they are playing a double game. If you ask me what their ultimate goal is, it’s to continue getting dues money from us no matter what.”



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