

Union pushes through contract on Southern California grocery workers

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Members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union in Southern California voted on Saturday to approve a new three-year contract with supermarket chains Vons, Albertsons, and Ralphs.

The contract was quickly pushed through by the union in a vote over the weekend, only a few days after the agreement was announced. Little has been made public, and workers were given no time to study its provisions. Both the companies and the unions hailed the deal.

The UFCW declared the deal a “win” for its members. However, it is clear that it contains huge concessions to meet the demands of the corporations, who had prepared thousands of replacement workers in the event of a strike.

At a news conference last week, Rick Icaza, president of the UFCW Local 770, proclaimed, “Our mission was to be able to let our members know they would be able to pay their rent, be able to take their children to the doctor, for them to go to the doctor—and we accomplished that *at the same time as preserving the company’s competitive position to be able to make a profit.*” (Emphasis added).

The only detail that has emerged in the media is the fact that all workers will pay \$7 a week (\$364 a year) for individual health insurance and \$15 a week (\$780 a year) for family insurance starting next April. For workers making close to minimum wage, this amounts to a 5 percent wage cut. For years, workers have been forced by supermarket management to pay higher premiums and have had caps placed on health care use.

More details of the agreement will be released in the coming weeks according to the UFCW. The very fact that the union has not been forthcoming on the specifics underscores the thoroughly antidemocratic character of the whole process. Workers have been kept entirely in

the dark throughout the contract negotiations.

Representatives for UFCW negotiated the deal with officials from the three supermarket chains last week after a deadline for a possible strike had passed. The tentative agreement was then given to workers to ratify at meetings over the weekend, even though workers had not been given any copies of the contract to review for themselves.

The union was counting on enough workers to be swayed by the news of an agreement with supermarket management to have it ratified a few days later. The vote tallies have not been disclosed by UFCW officials.

Grocery workers voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action twice—once in April and again in August. The UFCW was entirely opposed to such action, fearing that any struggle could become the focal point for a broader offensive of workers throughout the state against the attack on jobs, wages and benefits.

Strike action, moreover, would have placed workers on a collision course with the Democrats—Governor Jerry Brown at the state level, and the Obama Administration. The UFCW, along with unions throughout the state, supported Brown in his campaign for governor and now support his austerity measures to balance the state’s budget.

Mike Kasparian, a UFCW official, told 10News.com, “Avoiding a strike was huge. It’s not good for the companies, certainly. They lose market share. It’s not good for our members—the employees—who would be out of work.”

Citing the fact that San Diego has a double-digit unemployment rate he added, “It’s never a good time to go on strike. But certainly with the economy the way it is and unemployment being so high, we knew that.”

The last time grocery workers went on strike was in 2003. That strike lasted for 141 days and cost the

supermarket companies an estimated \$2 billion. The strike was ended when the UFCW accepted all the demands of the companies, including the establishment of a two-tier wage system with poverty-level wages for new hires.

In 2007, the UFCW signed a contract that supposedly ended the two-tier system, but in fact reestablished it in new form—extending by years the duration of time for new hires to reach higher-level wage levels.



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