

Grocery workers union signs agreement with Southern California supermarkets

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20 September 2011

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union announced on Monday that it had reached an agreement with Southern California supermarket chains.

Few details have been released, however the deal was praised by companies seeking significant concessions in benefits. There can be no doubt that it incorporates all their basic demands, and it should be rejected by grocery workers. A joint statement from Ralphs, Vons and Albertons—the principal corporations involved in the contract—said that the terms would mean that they would “be competitive in the marketplace.”

If approved by more than 50 percent of the members, the contract would last three years. It covers 62,000 workers in a region that extends from Metropolitan Los Angeles south to San Diego and the Mexican border. All UFCW locals are calling for a “yes” vote in ratifications this week.

From the beginning, the UFCW was opposed to a struggle to defend the jobs and wages of grocery workers. The companies meanwhile made clear that they were willing to lock workers out and hire strike breakers in order to impose their demands.

This contract will be the third of a series of sell-out agreements, following the 2004 and 2007 contracts, which imposed a two tiered wage system and the gradual elimination of full-time work.

Workers will go into the ratification meetings this week without a copy of the agreement on hand. UFCW officials are hoping that they will be able to sway enough workers to approve the contract before it can be seriously considered and reviewed.

The contract had expired in May of this year and was being extended day by day. Three-party talks, involving the UFCW, the supermarkets and a federal mediator had been ongoing since April. The fact that a federal

mediator was brought in, even before the old contract expired, is evidence of the importance that the Obama administration saw in preventing a strike.

A key factor in these negotiations is the UFCW’s relationship with the Democratic Party, with the Obama administration and with California Governor Jerry Brown. A strike would have put grocery works in a collision course with Brown. The UFCW, together with the rest of the trade union apparatus in California, supported Brown and is in agreement with his attempt to impose the cost of the state’s crisis on the backs of the working class. Employers, such as the supermarkets, continue to make super profits.

Even though grocery workers voted overwhelmingly in April to give the UFCW strike authorization, union officials made repeated statements signaling that there would be no strike. In August, workers once again gave the union strike authorization by a large margin.

The April and August votes were driven by mass opposition to a series of demands from supermarket management designed to impose on workers the cost of pensions and health care. Workers face greater insurance premiums, caps on health care use, and increased co-pays. Given that the health plan is managed as a joint trust fund by both UFCW bureaucrats and by company managers, union officials are not neutral on this benefit, which is also a source of personal income to some of them.

A secrecy agreement between the UFCW and the employers was largely observed throughout the negotiations, lest UFCW clerks and cashiers find out what was being discussed behind their back. Workers interviewed by the WSWs at the August meetings complained about being kept in the dark about what specifically was keeping the two sides apart.

Details of the tentative agreement still have not been

made public, pending ratification of the contract, according to union officials and a statement from the grocery chains.

UFCW local 324 leader Greg Conge is calling the tentative agreement a “win-win” for both sides. This can only mean that enough concessions were made by the union to meet the employers’ demands, combined with elements of a cosmetic nature that will support the UFCW’s dubious claim that jobs and health care are being protected.



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