

California food workers union reaches agreement with Food 4 Less

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The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) has reached an agreement with the Food 4 Less supermarket chain in Southern California. The deal increases wages for some while increasing the amount grocery workers are required to contribute to their own health care, effectively cutting wages.

Workers at Food 4 Less voted on January 10 to ratify the new contract. The chain, owned by parent company Kroger, has 11 stores in the San Diego area, with about 1,000 local workers.. Full details of the contract have not been made available, and the union did not release the vote tally. It is likely workers were asked by the union to vote on a contract without having complete information about it.

The new contract was ostensibly necessary to close the \$3 hourly wage gap between Food 4 Less workers and those at Ralphs. However, the contract includes up to \$15 a week worker contributions for health care. This increase mirrors that of the recent UCFW contract with Southern California supermarket chains Vons, Ralphs and Albertsons, which requires workers to pay \$7 a week for individual insurance, and \$15 a week for families. This amounts to a 5 percent pay reduction for a minimum wage worker. Previously, newer workers paid up to \$15 a week for health insurance, while other workers had no paycheck deductions.

Presenting the agreement as a victory for the workers, UFCW Local 135 President Mickey Kasparian declared, "There's no more tiered system." Kasparian failed to mention that the two-tiered system has been abolished in the interests of Kroger, not the workers.

The UFCW negotiated the contract behind closed doors. In December 2011, Food 4 Less workers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike if necessary. Grocery workers at other chains in the area worked from March 6 to late September without a contract. The

union pushed through the concessions contract despite the fact that workers voted in April, then again in August, to approve a strike. By negotiating with different chains separately, the UFCW is aiding the companies by isolating the workers' struggles.

Union officials were strongly opposed to strike action, due in large part to the close relationship between the union and the Democratic Party. A grocery worker strike threatens to mobilize workers outside of official political channels, and create political difficulties for Democratic Governor Jerry Brown. The UFCW heavily supports Brown and President Barack Obama. The Obama administration demonstrated its concern over the possibility of a strike by sending a federal official to mediate the contract negotiations over the summer and spring. The union has gone out of its way to make clear that it will not take any action that could result in a conflict between its membership and the prerogatives of these high-level Democrats.

A January 18 article in the UFCW Local 135 newsletter *On Point* indicates that the union played a role in the recent signature-gathering to recall Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin. The article states, "The move sends a simple message: the ideological war on workers will be met with stiff resistance by people who refuse to let their government be bankrolled by corporate special interests." But what of the workers of California who face Jerry Brown's austerity budget? What of the bailouts and austerity measures undertaken by Obama?

The UFCW has a long record of isolating and betraying the struggles of its membership. In 2003-2004, the UFCW forced a contract that resulted in a drastic reduction in wages by establishing a two-tier wage system, with new workers starting well below the level achieved through previous rounds of struggle.

After nearly a decade, the lower starting wage has become the new normal. The UFCW facilitated the end of the strike by ordering thousands of workers off the picket lines.

In reference to the new contract, Local 135 President Kasparian, said, “I am excited for our hardworking members at Food 4 Less, who, through their strength, were able to ensure they would be treated equally with the other grocery store workers at Ralphs, Vons, Albertsons and Stater Brothers.” In the face of ever-worsening prospects and conditions for grocery workers, the talk of “equality” only adds insult to injury.

WSWS reporters spoke with Food 4 Less workers in the San Diego region, who expressed skepticism toward the new contract and the role of the union.

Marcos, a meat cutter, stated, “The proposed four-hour work shift for us meat cutters is terrible. We are being asked to come in to work in the morning for four hours, after which regular clerks are to take over our position. I think it’s bad. It’s just really bad. A lot of us come from Tijuana, on a daily basis., Ffor four hours of work, it isn’t worth it. I don’t think many people would cross the border for such little work time.”

Sophia Flores, store associate and community college student, stated, “A lot of people get this union job for security reasons only. They’re afraid of getting fired. But there are a lot of jobs that can pay you \$10 an hour, union or nonunion. The contract prior to the one agreed on made it a bit easier to get a raise. After completing 400 hours of work one would receive a pay raise. The new contract is set at 1,000 hours for a raise. For a part-time worker making \$8.20 an hour, it makes life really tough.”

Another worker, Maribel Lewis, shared her experience with our reporters: “I’ve been working in the grocery industry for 25 years. In my time with Food 4 Less there has never been a strike and such low wages. The environment is a lot more lenient in relation to the bigger companies like Ralphs and Vons, but we all work just as hard. My concern is for the younger kids coming in to the company. They get a different contract and the 25, 35 cent difference isn’t much.” When asked of her opinion of the UFCW, she stated, “The union is with the company, they don’t really back us. They make good money.”

The attack on grocery workers has not come to a

close with the ratification of this contract. The big supermarket chains will continue to demand further concessions in wages and benefits in order to defend their profit margins. The unions, meanwhile, will continue to demonstrate their complete subordination to the big business parties and their determination to stifle any attempt by the workers to engage in a serious struggle.



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