

New England supermarket workers face contract battle

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5 February 2013

Some 36,000 Stop & Shop meat-cutters, cashiers and other workers in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island face a struggle in defense of wages and conditions as their contract is set to expire February 23. The Quincy, Mass.-based supermarket chain has set up hiring centers at eight locations for replacement workers in the event of a strike or lockout.

The current contract was approved by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union in March 2010 after three months of talks and threatened strike action. The contract contained a paltry wage increase of \$1.15 an hour over the course of three years for full-time workers and a \$750 signing bonus.

Part-time workers fared even worse, receiving wage increases of 25 to 60 cents per hour over the life of the contract and a \$100 to \$400 signing bonus, depending on length of service.

The contract, which was heralded by local UFCW Local 1445 spokesman Jim Carvalho as “an agreement that maintained our great health and pension benefits and provided general wage increases,” included a provision to increase the cost of health benefits by up to \$20 per month for all full- and part-time employees. It was finally accepted at a mass meeting two weeks after the previous contract expired, with many workers angry at the final outcome.

It is anticipated that this year’s negotiations will see the company drive for even greater concessions from the workforce. As in 2010, the supermarket chain has set up hiring centers at eight locations across the state for replacement workers in preparation for the contract expiration. Media ads for replacement workers state: “The temporary employment would occur in the event there is a strike or lockout because of a labor dispute.” Stop & Shop is offering rates of \$15 an hour for full-time work and \$12 an hour for part-time—substantially

higher than the wages of many regular employees.

The director of communications for Stop & Shop New England, Judi Palmer, was quoted as saying, “Our ads in the media for replacement workers is standard operating procedure, standard contingency planning. We want to be sure our stores remain open.”

According to the *Boston Herald*, Local 1445 spokesman Mark Govoni referred to the company’s hiring moves as the “normal course” and declined further comment.

The web site of UFCW Local 328, one of the five locals representing Stop & Shop workers, called the move an unprovoked attempt to scare and intimidate union members and appealed for people to leaflet the recruitment sites.

Stop & Shop is owned by the Dutch firm Royal Ahold NV, one of the largest food retailers in the world with an estimated 450,000 employees worldwide. Despite increased competition from companies such as Walmart and Target, Ahold USA sales of \$6.1 billion in 2012 were 4.3 percent higher than the previous year’s \$5.89 billion.

In its drive to gain ever-greater profit margins on these multibillion-dollar sales, the company seeks to impose cheap wages on workers such as those at Stop & Shop while eradicating health and other benefits.

Although full details of what the company is demanding remain undisclosed, a report of the January 29 and 30 negotiation sessions published at a union site billed as the “official web site for all UFCW/Stop & Shop negotiation news” gives some indication of the scale of the attacks management is demanding.

The statement reads in part: “Issues still need addressing, particularly those related to holiday premiums and sick pay as well as language related to job transfers. We anticipate wrapping these items up

soon and hopefully next week we will start negotiating over the critical economic issues surrounding pensions, health and welfare, and wages.”

It further states, “All five locals remain united, remain strong, and remain in solidarity with each other, which is key. As long as we stay together we can remain cautiously optimistic that we will come away with a contract that is fair and equitable for both sides.”

In implementing its contingency plans and setting up scab hiring centers, the company appears less optimistic that what it has to offer will be “fair and equitable.” The company is preparing for the possibility of a confrontation while the union works to prevent one, preparing to impose the demands of management as they did in 2010.



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