UFCW in Southern California continues talks with Food 4 Less in wake of strike vote

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The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) is continuing negotiations with Food 4 Less stores in Southern California in the wake of a strike vote by members in late July. The contract expired on June 8, and the company is proposing to cut hours, transfer better-paid work to lower-paid employees, increase workers' health and welfare contributions and freeze pay for new employees at the minimum wage for several years.

Food 4 Less workers are demanding better wages and benefits equal to those in other chains owned by Kroger. "Come on, it's been 8 years, and I've only gotten a 40 cent raise! In eight years, eight years! That's ridiculous," remarked one worker.

A strike date has yet to be decided, but picket captains met on July 31 to discuss what demands should be raised at the bargaining table.

Mickey Kasparian, president of UFCW Local 135, stated that he is meeting "with the police force to try to outline the type of strike we would have," in preparation of 6,500 workers taking to the picket line. The workers were called to vote for a strike, with the union stipulating that it only take place if "deemed necessary" by the local president.

Kroger profits amounted to $501 million in the first quarter of this year. Food 4 Less, which operates 95 franchises in Southern California, contributed a significant amount to that total.

In response to the strike vote, management issued a statement declaring that it "is committed to reaching an agreement with the union that is good for associates and allows the company to continue to operate in a very competitive market. The only place to reach an agreement is at the bargaining table."

For its part, the UFCW has imposed one rotten contract after another on the backs of supermarket workers in California over the past decade. In the current round of negotiations, the union allowed the contract to expire without calling a strike and is continuing open-ended talks.

The UFCW has called for a consumer boycott from August 8 to August 13, a completely ineffectual action aimed merely at allowing workers to vent a little anger.

The UFCW's record in recent negotiations is one of concessions and repeated capitulation to the demands of the employers. The union has consistently moved to isolate the struggles of grocery workers, negotiating contracts separately for workers in different states and different chains, thus effectively imposing a "double" isolation and ensuring defeat in detail. In the event that strikes did erupt, most notably in 2004 when nearly 60,000 grocery workers struck in Southern California, workers were isolated and worn down. The union eventually forced strikers to accept a contract that slashed wages for new hires, instituted a two-tier wage system, froze wages for three years and shifted the burden of health care costs onto workers.

Similar betrayals followed over the ensuing decade, with the same pattern of separate negotiations and carefully contained strikes and limited picketing. The revocation of the two-tier system in the contract negotiated in 2007 was offset by an increase in the amount of time needed to reach the top of the pay scale from six to nine years. The overall trend for UFCW workers has been toward increased health care costs for workers and the effective continuation of separate pay scales for workers at different Kroger chains.

Food 4 Less workers in Southern California spoke to the WSWS expressing their dissatisfaction with the union. "We don't agree with the contract they [the UFCW] are trying to give us," declared one worker.

Another worker expressed her frustration with the union's attempts to isolate workers: "Ralph's is Contract A because they are not a warehouse store. We are Contract B. It would be nice if we all went on strike, if we all went out together. That's one thing we've wondered about. We all do the same thing. Why aren't we all on the same contract? Why can't we all negotiate at the same time?"

Only two weeks ago, Kroger ratified an agreement with the UFCW that merges the Cincinnati and the Dayton, Ohio, contracts into one. Sukanya Madlinger, president of Kroger's Cincinnati/Dayton Division, expressed her enthusiasm: "This agreement comes after thoughtful and productive work by both the company and union bargaining committees. I want to thank our associates for supporting this agreement and for the excellent service they provide to our customers every day."

Moreover, the Cerberus acquisition of Safeway, the second largest grocery store in the United States, approved late last month by Safeway shareholders, will likely bode ill for grocery workers. The $9.2 billion sale places Safeway under subordination to Albertsons—already owned by Cerberus—and effectively creates a major competitor to Kroger. Cerberus is a notorious "vulture fund" that specializes in investing in troubled companies, slashing costs, and then reselling them for a profit.

The UFCW, for its part, is quite satisfied with the development. In a statement following the initial sale of Safeway in March, UFCW president Joe Hansen stated, "The [UFCW] represents tens of thousands of workers within [Safeway and Cerberus]. Through ups and downs, the UFCW has maintained good relationships with both Safeway and Cerberus. The UFCW will work closely with [them] through the acquisition process and beyond so that these major supermarket companies can maintain strong market share."

The cheerful statement studiously avoids mention of the fact that upon the earlier acquisition of Albertson's in 2006, Cerberus, within a matter of months, imposed a wave of closures affecting scores of locations and laid off 1,000 workers.

As is consistently the case in recent mergers and acquisitions, restructuring of large companies follows the demands of investors and always translates into workers losing jobs and benefits. The UFCW's commitment to Cerberus's "strong market share" speaks volumes about whose interests it represents.

While grocery workers are confronted with stagnant wages and increased health care costs, Safeway CEO Robert Edwards is set to receive $25.3 million in merger-related compensation, plus a $4 million severance package, and former CEO Steven Burd will receive $7.5 million in stock.