

Union seeks to ram through grocery worker contract in Southern California

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Grocery workers in Southern California are voting today on a tentative agreement reached between the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) and Food 4 Less, a division of the Kroger Company. The contract covers about 6,500 workers at 95 Food 4 Less chain stores.

In blatantly undemocratic fashion, the union is keeping secret all the details of the new tentative agreement, which was worked out behind closed doors with management.

Workers employed at Food 4 Less have been without a contract since June 8. Kroger, a Cincinnati-based Fortune 500 Company, pulled in more than \$500 million in profits the first quarter of this year. It has demanded continued concessions from workers, in the form of wage and benefit cutbacks and the greater use of part-time labor.

The assault on grocery workers at Food 4 Less is part of a broader attack on service workers. Grocery workers throughout the country have seen stagnating or declining real wages, already at a poverty level, and insecure and irregular employment.

This type of low wages work is typical of the conditions facing the entire working class. The Obama administration has hailed an “economic recovery” that has been realized entirely in the form of soaring corporate profits, a booming stock market and record inequality. Mass unemployment persists, and the vast majority of jobs “created” since the economic crash of 2008 are insufficient to meet basic needs.

The trade unions, including the UFCW, have played a critical role in enforcing the dictates of the corporations and the political establishment. While there is growing anger among grocery workers, the unions have sought systematically to isolate workers, prevent any struggle and push through concessions contract after

concessions contract.

The actions of the UFCW in relation to the Food 4 Less workers is particularly revealing. The union, which also includes workers at Vons, Albertsons and Ralphs, has held separate contract votes this year in order to isolate and pit grocery workers against each other.

The union allowed the old contract to expire in June without taking any formal action. In July, workers voted overwhelmingly for strike authorization, an expression of the desire among workers for a struggle. The response of the union was to call a weeklong consumer boycott in August, aimed at providing the pretext of opposition as the union conspired with management behind the backs of the workers.

The union has refused to comment on any aspect of the new agreement until after September 2, that is, after members have voted. The aim is to ram through a contract as quickly as possible before workers even have a chance to examine what they are being asked to vote on.

The only available information pertaining to the new contract is a statement by Bryan Kaltenbach, president of Food 4 Less, praising the deal as a “solid and competitive compensation package.” In the language of corporate America, “competitive” means low-wage.

When concerned members expressed an interest on Facebook in reviewing the agreement before the vote, the response of UFCW Local 135 was evasive, stating, “We think you will be extremely pleased with the details of the tentative agreement... However, we cannot allow the contract to be reviewed prior to the ratification date. Southern California Local Leaders want to protect the legality of the documents.”

These comments were subsequently removed from Facebook in order to silence any further discussion.

Similar tactics were used in 2011 for a contract at Ralphs, Albertons and Vons that included an increase in health care contributions. At the time, UFCW 770 President Rick Icaza declared his solidarity with the company, saying his goal was “preserving the company’s competitive position to be able to make a profit.”

In 2012, a UFCW agreement covering Food 4 Less workers included a similar increase in health care costs.

The role of the unions was stated clearly by UFCW President Joe Hansen, following the sale of Safeway to the vulture fund Cerberus, which already owns Albertons. “Through ups and downs, the UFCW has maintained good relationships with both Safeway and Cerberus,” Hansen declared. “The UFCW will work closely with [them] through the acquisition process and beyond so that these major supermarket companies can maintain strong market share.”

In other words, the role of the UFCW is to ensure the profits of the companies. The same role is being reprised in the shotgun vote at Food 4 Less.



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