

Grocery workers vote to strike in Southern California

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Grocery workers in Southern California voted last Monday to authorize strikes against Albertsons, Ralphs and Vons. Votes have taken place in San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Los Angeles counties involving between 50,000 and 60,000 employees. The workers are part of the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) and have been working without a contract since March 6. No date has been announced for the strike.

The current contract offer from the grocers stands at a meager 10 cents per hour wage increase through 2018 and two bonuses of 10 cents and 15 cents an hour during that time. The proposal makes cuts to holiday pay, and lengthening the time required for an entry-level worker to earn the highest pay grade. The companies are also pushing to raise the early retirement age from 60 to 65 and are seeking to shift costs of health care squarely onto the backs of the workers.

In over a decade of crushing defeats and the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, the financial industry has played an increasingly dominant role in the grocery business. According to the UFCW, the two corporations involved in the current negotiations, Cerberus (owner of Vons, Albertsons, Pavillions and Safeway) and Kroger (owner of Ralphs) are making combined profits of \$4 billion each year off of these investments. Most of the profits are made from purchasing companies and turning them around by “restructuring,” an aggressive corporate process which produces store closures and strips the remaining employees of their wages, health benefits, and pensions.

After a 19-week struggle by grocery workers in 2004, the UFCW surrendered to all the major demands of the supermarkets. At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “This betrayal of the longest work stoppage in

the history of the US supermarket industry sets the stage for devastating rollbacks in the working conditions and living conditions for hundreds of thousands of workers who already face low wages and brutal exploitation.”

In the re-emerging grocery struggle, the union is again employing empty rhetoric to appear to oppose the corporations. In reality, the UFCW is working closely with both companies to control the scope and extent of the strike to ensure that it will have minimum or no impact on corporate profits.

While calling for a strike vote, the bureaucracy has kept workers in the dark about the negotiations. The two parties have scheduled ten meetings through the end of July, giving the union ample time to conjure up a sellout deal and avert the strike, which is ostensibly scheduled for sometime in August.

A measure of the UFCW’s support for corporate interests is revealed by its recent endorsement of Hillary Clinton for Democratic presidential nominee. Marc Perrone, UFCW International President, cynically stated: “For our union family, the 2016 Presidential election is about electing someone who will fight every single day for the issues that matter most to our 1.3 million hard-working members and their families.”

Nothing about this can be further from the truth. Far from fighting “every single day,” Clinton is the darling of Wall Street, the candidate for war and imperialism. Domestically, she proposes right-wing economic measures poorly cloaked in rhetoric about economic inequality.

Clinton, along with leading Democrats and the pseudo-left, has been a major proponent of slowly raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2020, an increase that would not even keep pace with the quickly increasing cost of living. To add insult to injury,

companies are now using even this paltry increase as a means to further slash pensions and health care in order to remain competitive. Currently, new-hires earn just 10 cents above minimum wage (\$10 an hour).

The assault on grocery workers is part of a broader attack on all workers. In recent weeks, Verizon, AT&T, Allina Health and Kaiser Permanente workers have entered into struggle against their companies in an attempt to defend wages and benefits from aggressive cuts. The situation in the US is mirrored in every country in the world, from Mexico to France.

The media is engaged in toeing the line of the giant supermarkets and is seeking to quell any popular support for a strike. In an article entitled “The last grocery strike opened the door for supermarket upstarts. What happens if there’s another strike?” the *Los Angeles Times* reports, “A strike presents an opportunity to grocers to break the shopping habits of consumers. Once someone flees to another chain, they often don’t go back, analysts said.”

Miro Copic, a marketing lecturer at San Diego State University, echoes the same line and “warns” that a new strike may have similar effects to that of the strike in 2003 and 2004 that lasted for 141 days: “All of a sudden, there are a lot of options for consumers. A protracted strike can create more problems for these chains. That’s the last thing they want at this point.”

Rick Icaza, president of UFCW Local 770, makes the attitude of the union explicitly clear: “We don’t want to strike. We understand the impact on consumers, our communities and our members.” Such statements reassure the corporations that the unions are willing to ram through concessions as long as union dues are paid.

The main concern expressed by these agents of capitalism is the resurgence of class struggle and their fear that a strike may break out independently and out of the union’s control.

The current strike vote comes less than ten months since Haggen Inc. closed up many of its supermarkets in the southwest, which had been bought from Vons and Albertsons only a few months before in a divestiture move that ended up costing the jobs of some 1,000 workers. The move by Haggen to buy the stores was initially applauded by the UFCW, but was widely seen from the beginning as a sellout.

WSWS reporters in San Diego intervened at one of

the informational meetings hosted by the UFCW and spoke to workers afterwards. Many workers have been shifted from company to company, store to store, four times or more in the past year just trying to hold on to a job.

Francisco told WSWS reporters about his experience: “Last year, Haggen bought out the store I worked at. I was able to stay on there for six months but then they closed down the store and they transferred me to another Haggen. Then that store closed and now I’m back at Vons—but now I’m not full-time and I didn’t get my old position back.”

Unable to find full-time positions, many workers resort to working two jobs to make ends meet. Francisco, a meat cutter at Vons, said: “I have three daughters and I’m the only one working in my family. I’ve had to get another part-time job to afford everything. Now they are talking about cutting the pensions too; it’s not fair, we are trying to be a good example for our kids and look to the future.”

Oscar, a long time grocery worker, worked for Vons and Haggen. “When Haggen first took over our store, they brainwashed us. Why don’t they care about us? For them it’s about investments. They want \$2 billion in profits and where is it going to come from? Making cuts and taking away our hours.”

Share, a worker at Vons expressed her skepticism toward the unions, “They won’t let us read the contract or allow to ask questions. They told us by faith to vote yes, but I’m skeptical. They just went up there and told us nothing. When we go on strike the leadership still gets full pay. They should get penalized for not having a contract.”

Teresa, another worker present at the meeting spoke to us about the two-tier system implemented in 2004. Teresa told us, “It’s not fair to the new people coming into the company. The cost of housing and everything has gone up but there are no raises. It’s just these stupid little bonuses they gave us that amount to about \$100 after taxes and everything.”



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