

31,000 Stop & Shop supermarket workers strike at over 240 supermarkets in New England

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More than 31,000 supermarket workers in three southern New England states remained on strike for a fourth day on Sunday against the Stop & Shop supermarket chain. The strike is the largest in the retail industry since 2003, and the second-largest private-sector walkout since 2016. Workers have not been on strike at the grocery chain in 30 years.

The strike comes on the heels of an upsurge of workers' struggles both in the US and internationally, including a wave of teachers' walkouts in the US over the past year, the strike of *maquiladora* workers in Matamoros, Mexico, and the ongoing nationwide walkout by over 300,000 teachers in Poland.

The United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) was forced to call out the workers on Thursday, more than six weeks after five locals in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island voted overwhelmingly for strike action against proposals by management that attack workers' wages, health insurance, and pension benefits. The workers' contract expired February 23.

The UFCW has been meeting with Stop & Shop management for the past several days, with a federal mediator present. Although the union has not reported on the progress of the negotiations, according to "FAQs" posted on the Stop & Shop website, the company is maintaining a hard line in their drive to reduce workers' wages and benefits.

Stop & Shop is owned by billion-dollar Dutch-owned retailer Royal Ahold Delhaize NV, which also owns Food Lion, Hannaford and other grocery chains. Ahold is seeking to drive down the wages and conditions of Stop & Shop workers—which include cashiers, department heads, stock personnel, deli clerks, butchers and bakers—to those of their rivals at nonunion grocers Market Basket, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and Walmart.

Amazon is the latest entry into the competitive grocery market with its purchase of Whole Foods. After the acquisition, workers have reported that following owner Jeff Bezos' raising starting wages at Whole Foods to \$15 an hour, both part-time and full-time employees have seen their hours slashed, rendering the wage hike basically worthless.

Stop & Shop stores reopened Friday with replacement workers, but management was forced to close some locations, as the strikebreakers—including salaried personnel and workers recruited and bussed in—were not able to keep up with stocking the shelves and other tasks. At a location in Dorchester, Massachusetts,

strikers reported that a food delivery to the store had not been made in three days. Nearly 1,000 truck drivers and warehouse workers, members of the Teamsters union, are reportedly honoring the picket lines.

Ahold Delhaize generates about 60 percent of its sales in the US and Stop & Shop is its biggest brand. The strike has cut across the Dutch company's "turnaround" plan to revive the grocery chain after several years of slow performance. Ahold Delhaize shares fell 1.4 percent on news of the strike, erasing this year's gains. Last year, the conglomerate reported profits of more than \$2 billion to its shareholders.

The retailer has pledged to invest up to \$150 million annually in the 413-unit chain—which also includes stores in New York and New Jersey, where the UFCW has not called out thousands of workers to strike—to make the stores more attractive and keep shoppers from taking their business to online grocers and budget stores like Germany's Aldi, which will have nearly 2,000 US stores by year's end.

Stop & Shop is seeking to impose deep cuts to workers' compensation and benefits in an effort to transform the company into a low-wage sweatshop. For workers, many of whom have worked at the company for decades and live in the neighborhoods where they work, the company's demands are unacceptable and have brought the conflict to the breaking point.

The company is seeking to drive an even deeper wedge than already exists between full- and part-time workers. While workers laboring full-time for more than three years would continue to make yearly wage increases of about \$20 per week over the next three years, part-time workers and full-time workers with less than three years' seniority would not see raises until they reach the top of the full-time scale, but after this would only see yearly bonuses in the \$1,000-1,250 range.

Health care costs would nearly double over the three years of the contract, according to management's demands. The company's original proposal called for raising health care deductibles from an average of \$200 per year to \$1,500—a 650 percent increase. Workers would also only be able to access health care for spouses who do not have a group health plan through their own employer.

The WSWS spoke to pickets outside the Stop & Shop location at South Bay in Dorchester.

Gus Cutone, a produce department head who has worked for

Stop & Shop since 1984, said, “They’re trying to undercut all the new people. For most of the current full-time people, we would get our 50 cent raises. But if you’ve been made full-time in the last three-four years, no raise. You’re offered a \$1,000 bonus each year for the next three years, which is not right.

“That’s why I’m here, because it’s not right for the new people. What they want to do is take holidays away; they want to cut sick time.”

He said his store had been shut down by the strike and he had been asked to picket at this location. “I don’t know how many replacement workers they have in there, but they’re actually coming in by the vanload,” he said. “I don’t know where they find them, but with this economy, they’re being bussed in.”

Al Peeples has been a Stop & Shop worker for 16 years. “It’s very sad about all the profits they’re making and they’re not giving back to the workers,” he said. “Sometimes the customers come in and they’ve had a really bad day and you come and talk to them and help them out.

“A lot of Stop & Shop people are from the community and it’s their only income. And we’re not asking for much, we just want them to be fair. But they want to take away stuff like holidays and overtime.

“They want to increase healthcare costs by about \$40 a month; basically, it would go up to \$80 for some people. What I know about the pensions is they want to eventually erase that and get a 401(k). And they want to put a cap on our raises. Me being with Stop & Shop for 16 years, I’m part-time so I’m only making \$15 an hour. Someone coming in now, they start at \$11 an hour, and when they get up to \$18 an hour, they’re going to put a cap on it.

“Some shoppers have not crossed the picket line. But for others, this is their local Stop & Shop and they really don’t have anywhere else to go or can’t get here. But at this store, nothing’s been delivered in three days, so nothing in there is fresh.”

As in other recent workers’ struggles, such as the six-month National Grid 2018-19 lockout of energy workers, Democratic Party politicians have feigned support for workers on the picket lines. Senator Elizabeth Warren visited the Somerville, Massachusetts, Stop & Shop location on Friday, bearing doughnuts and claiming to support workers’ demands. Democratic presidential hopefuls Senators Cory Booker, Kamala Harris, Kirsten Gillibrand, and Bernie Sanders have also made empty statements of support for the Stop & Shop workers.

The fact is the Democrats, no less than Trump and the Republicans, support the relentless attack on workers’ living standards and working conditions in order to boost corporate profit. President Obama encouraged corporations to cut so-called “Cadillac health care plans,” and shift costs onto the backs of workers. And it should be remembered that during the union-busting decade of the 1980s, Democrats, like Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich, sent out the National Guard to break the strike of the Hormel meatpackers, members of UFCW Local P-9, in 1986.

For its part, the union seeks to reach a rotten compromise with Stop & Shop management that they can ram past the opposition of workers and accelerate the transformation of the workplace into a low-wage sweatshop.

Anthony Perrone, the international president of the UFCW, made

\$341,398 last year, according to the union’s report to the US Labor Department, nearly 20 times what an average cashier or clerk at Stop & Shop brings home every year. The UFCW International brought in \$292 million in revenue last year, including \$222 million in dues, and only paid out \$60,000 in strike benefits.

While securing the financial and business interests of the union apparatus, the UFCW has spent the last four decades isolating and betraying strikes, including the 1985-86 Hormel strike, and colluding in the lowering of the wages and living standards of grocery workers who once earned relatively higher pay.

There is widespread support for a real struggle against the relentless attack on jobs, social services and living standards and the enormous growth of social inequality. To fight to rally this support, Stop & Shop workers should form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions, to reach out and mobilize the support of the broadest section of the working class for mass demonstrations and joint strike action. A call should immediately be made for Stop & Shop workers in New Jersey and New York to join the strike and to prepare a nationwide strike of retail workers to fight poverty wages and the attack on health care and pension rights. At the same time, US workers should appeal to their brothers and sisters in the Netherlands and throughout Europe to coordinate international action against the giant transnational corporation.

This must be combined with the development of a political counteroffensive of the working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist profit system they defend. The giant corporations and the great advances in technology, which are now used to destroy jobs and increase the exploitation of workers, must be put under the collective ownership of the working class as part of the socialist reorganization of the economy.



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