UFCW orders New England Stop & Shop strikers back to work without seeing contract

Kate Randall
23 April 2019

On Sunday evening, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union ordered its 31,000 striking Stop & Shop workers back to work effective Monday morning. The union announced a tentative agreement between the supermarket chain and the five UFCW locals in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. The striking workers included cashiers, stockers, bakers, deli clerks and butchers at more than 240 supermarkets across New England.

Stop & Shop workers walked out on April 11 and the strike was in its 10th day on Sunday when union officials called it off. The UFCW has left workers in the dark about provisions of the tentative agreement, if it actually exists, and ordered them back to work before workers had the right to review the deal and vote on it. The union said only that the contract would not be made public until workers ratified it and that ratification meetings would be held "as soon as possible."

Workers should demand to see the fine print and have sufficient time to study and discuss it before any vote. What has become of Stop & Shop's demands to drastically raise healthcare deductibles and limit coverage for employee spouses? The company also demanded replacing defined pensions for newly hired workers, and to replace wage increases for lower-seniority workers with yearly bonuses that would amount to a pay cut. They also demanded cuts to holidays and sick time.

From the beginning, UFCW have trampled over the rights of workers. First, they ignored an overwhelming strike authorization vote and kept workers on the job for more than six weeks after the expiration of the contract. When the UFCW finally called the walkout, they refused to pay workers their hard-earned strike benefits even though the union has hundreds of millions of dollars in assets. Then after negotiations were conducted behind workers' backs, the UFCW suddenly announced a deal that no one has seen.

Any agreement reached on such a basis can be nothing but a sellout and further capitulation to Stop & Shop's efforts to transform the supermarket chain into a low-wage sweatshop on par with their non-union rivals Amazon-owned Whole Foods, Market Basket, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and Walmart.

Workers must reject the specious claims by union officials that the contract is the "best that they could get." 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 Delhaize generates about 60 percent of its sales in the US and Stop & Shop is its biggest brand. The transnational conglomerate reported profits of more than $2 billion last year and has spent billions on stock buybacks for its richest investors.

Stop & Shop workers should organize rank-and-file committees independent of the union to campaign for the defeat of the sellout deal. These committees should fight for a resumption of the strike and its expansion to include Stop & Shop workers in New York and New Jersey, and the 60,000 Ralphs, Vons and Albertsons workers in California, which the UFCW has kept on the job for more than a month after the expiration of their contracts.

Stop & Shop workers with high-seniority, many with decades on the job, have defended *all* workers' wages and benefits. One worker on the picket line told the WSWS, "It's not just about us, it's about the people coming behind us," while another said, "That's why I'm here, because it's not right for the new people." The union, however, has likely accepted a contract that divides the workforce even more deeply into multiple

© World Socialist Web Site

tiers of wages and benefits with the aim of eventually driving out older workers until only lower-compensated workers remain.

Workers walking the picket line have received strong support, both from customers and fellow workers. A leading retail consultant at New York City-based Strategic Resource Group estimated that the strike has been costing Stop & Shop $2 million per week and that the grocery chain would lose as much as 5 percent of its total annual sales and 4 percent of its profits for this year.

The stores have also been depleted of products because the vast majority of the nearly 1,000 truck drivers and warehouse workers, members of the Teamsters union, have been honoring the picket line.

In other words, the UFCW called off the strike not because it was weak or because the ranks were wavering but because the strike was effective. The aim of the UFCW was never to win this struggle but only to convince management to work more closely with the union to achieve its corporate aims.

There is widespread support for a real struggle against the relentless attack on jobs, social services and living standards, but this resurgence of struggles strikes fear in the hearts of union officials and big-business politicians alike.

The UFCW has touted the support of Democratic Party politicians—in particular those vying for the presidential nomination—including Massachusetts Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey, Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar and Bernie Sanders. Former vice president Joe Biden, who is expected to announce his presidential bid this week, showed up to Stop & Shop in Dorchester, Mass., with Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, a former building trades union official, along with various union officials and hangers-on.

But the Democrats are no less the enemies of the working class than Trump and the Republicans. Under Obama, the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top occurred in US history, while tens of millions of workers, particularly the younger generation, were condemned to low-paying, part-time and temporary jobs.

Stop & Shop workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees. The rising tide of opposition by workers in the US and around the world—from teachers in the US and Poland to Mexican sweatshop workers and Yellow Vest protesters in France—shows that there is enormous support for a fight back against social inequality.

This resistance must be combined with a political counteroffensive against the big-business-controlled parties and the capitalist profit system they defend. The great advances in technology, which are now used in supermarkets and other industries 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.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site