

# Anger of West Coast grocery workers mounts as union seeks to block strikes

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Talks between the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) and three of the major Southern California supermarket chains resumed last week after grocery workers overwhelmingly voted in favor of strike action late last month. A strike by more than 46,000 workers employed by Ralphs, Albertsons and Vons supermarkets would be the first walkout against the food retail giants since 2004.

More than 96 percent of voting grocery workers backed a strike, which would hit 500 stores throughout Southern California. More than 25,000 supermarket workers at the companies' stores in Oregon and Washington state have also voted to strike.

The strike authorization followed the intervention of a federal mediator in April after the last contract expired in March. Many grocery workers can no longer endure the poverty wages the chains pay while their executives make several million dollars in annual salary. According to the UFCW, about 10 percent of all grocery workers are homeless and 60 percent work second jobs to sustain themselves.

The grocery chains are seeking to drive down the living standards of workers even further, offering wage increases of less than 1 percent—far less than the rate of inflation. They are also demanding wage cuts for cashiers of more than 25 percent. Further cuts to employee health benefits are also being sought.

"Management has been trying to hire people to work in departments like this one and paying them what the people collecting the shopping carts make," Allie, a supermarket deli worker with 12 years at Ralphs, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Nobody stays because it's so little pay for all the work we have to do."

"Another thing we're upset about is how they define part-time and full-time jobs. I've been here for 12 years, and I'm considered part-time even though some

weeks I'm working 36 to 40 hours. Shouldn't I be a full-timer and be able to get benefits? There are a lot of people like me at this store," Allie said.

Negotiators for the union and management are scheduled to meet this Wednesday. Meanwhile, the UFCW is doing everything it can to dampen the militancy of the workers and ignore their near unanimous strike vote.

Pete Wassdorp, UFCW Local 1167 communications director made clear that the strike vote should be interpreted as a pressure tactic and nothing more. "We remain optimistic that we can reach an agreement ... A strike is the option of last resort."

The Southern California grocery workers were joined by their counterparts in the Pacific Northwest who voted in favor of a strike on July 5. That strike vote involved employees of the Fred Meyer, QFC, Albertsons and Safeway chains in the Portland, Oregon area. The vote was called by UFCW Local 555, which includes more than 25,000 grocery workers throughout the Oregon and Southwest Washington state areas.

Local 555 has spread voting out at its various regional locations over the course of the next two months rather than allow its members to take a single decisive vote all at once. The last votes are to take place on August 21, meaning that a strike of Northwest workers wouldn't take place until after that date. According to a statement released by local 555, "a final decision will not be made until all votes from across the jurisdiction are aggregated." Negotiations between Local 555 and the conglomerates have been underway for more than a year.

Taking advantage of the media blackout, enforced by the union, the supermarket chains have signaled that they plan to fully press ahead with cuts. Dennis Gibson, president of Fred Meyer Stores, Inc. responded to the

strike authorization vote announcement saying, “Our goals, always, are to reach an agreement that provides a solid package of wages, benefits and a stable pension plan for our valued associates that allows our company to remain competitive despite disruption from the grocery industry.” Many workers are receiving a wage increase of only 25 cents an hour, an effective wage cut when factoring for inflation.

The fact of the matter is that the grocery workers are in an enormously powerful position with the unions doing everything in their power to prevent them from bringing their full strength to bear. Workers in Southern California and the Pacific Northwest are in fact fighting the same exact multi-billion-dollar corporate interests.

Fred Meyer in the Pacific Northwest is a subsidiary of the Kroger company, the second largest retailer in the US. Kroger also owns QFC and Ralphs in Southern California. Safeway, Albertsons and Vons are all part of Albertsons Companies LLC, the second largest supermarket chain in the US after Kroger. Both companies are the product of decades of mergers and acquisitions beginning in 1939 in the case of Albertsons and 1883 in the case of Kroger. Albertsons has captured more than \$60 billion in revenue thus far in 2019 while Kroger has captured more than \$120 billion.

Moreover, workers in food service support industries are also eager to fight the giant chains. This has prompted the Teamsters union and the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor—which have a long history of isolating and betraying strikes—to vow that truckers and other workers will not cross picket lines in the event of a grocery walkout.

The Teamsters are notorious for promoting nationalism, pitting native-born American workers against their class brothers and sisters in Mexico and Canada. In a series of one-day strikes by teachers in the California state capital of Sacramento, Teamsters officials denounced teachers for daring to strike against budget cuts and school privatization, ordering their members to cross picket lines while the strike was in progress.

The Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, which nominally represents more than 800,000 workers in the second largest metropolitan area in the US, opposed any mobilization of workers to back the LA teachers strike last January. Allied with the state and city

Democrats who are spearheading the attack on teachers and public education, the labor federation aided the United Teachers of Los Angeles, which betrayed the strike.

The strike votes by workers in Southern California and the Pacific Northwest opens up the possibility of a joint struggle against the two giant conglomerates. But this is only possible if workers wrest control away from the UFCW bureaucracy and form their own rank-and-file workplace committees. These committees fight to unite grocery workers with truck drivers, teachers, autoworkers and all sections of the working class in an industrial and political counter-offensive against big business and the two corporate-controlled parties.

Only last April, the UFCW abruptly shut down the 10-day strike by more than 31,000 Stop & Shop grocery workers in the Northeastern US and accepted increases in healthcare deductibles, the replacement of defined benefit pension plans with 401(k) style plans and cuts to holidays and sick time. The Stop & Shop workers were told by the UFCW their contract was “the best they could get.”

During the 19-week strike by 71,000 workers against Ralphs, Vons and Albertsons in 2004, the UFCW accepted drastic reductions in overtime pay, cuts to holiday pay and sick time, increases in healthcare deductibles and the elimination of defined pension plans. These are cuts grocery workers have been forced to live with to this day.



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