

14,000 Safeway workers in Northern California prepare for possible strike

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14,000 Northern California Safeway grocery workers may strike over precarious working conditions and proposed cuts to benefits and real wages in one of the most expensive regions in the United States. Effective February 17, the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) Local 5 canceled its contract 18 months after it had expired and has begun holding a series of two-hour pickets after a 95 percent strike authorization vote.

Whether a strike takes place remains to be seen. While there is near-unanimous support from Safeway workers for a strike, the UFCW has done everything it can to for a year and a half to prevent a strike. If the UFCW does call a strike, its purpose will be to further wear down and isolate Northern California Safeway workers and starve them into submission.

Nationally, Safeway workers make an average of \$12.59 per hour according to PayScale.com. In California, wages tend to be slightly higher, generally in the mid-to-high teens. A full-time employee working for \$15 per hour 40 hours a week makes \$2,600 per month, less than the \$2,800 median monthly rent of a two-bedroom apartment in the San Francisco Bay Area. However, roughly three quarters of Safeway employees are part-time and ineligible for benefits. Nationwide, 60 percent of grocery workers work multiple jobs to survive and 10 percent are homeless, according to the UFCW.

The grocery industry has been pushing to cut costs for the past two decades in the face of competition from WalMart and online grocery services such as Amazon. Many chains have promoted automation such as self-checkout, allowing them to lay off cashiers and other employees. Safeway stores are now run by skeleton crews, with employees complaining of chronic understaffing. Still, profit margins for conventional

grocers such as Safeway have remained around 2 percent for the past decade, varying from about 1 to 3 percent.

Workers are also fighting against Wall Street investment firms that stand behind the major grocery chains, and who are coordinating a global campaign of cuts directed against the working class. Safeway's parent company, private equity firm Cerberus Capital Management, which controls \$50 billion in assets, has a long history of asset stripping across many sectors of the economy. One of the most infamous of these was Cerberus' takeover of Chrysler in 2007, after which it decimated autoworkers' living standards.

Safeway is demanding large cuts in healthcare and pension benefits, increased out-of-pocket medical costs and a wage increase of less than 1 percent, which translates to a wage cut when inflation is factored in. However, the UFCW is only demanding roughly double this wage increase, which would still barely keep pace with inflation.

The UFCW, which has collaborated with grocery companies since the 1980s in the systematic destruction of the living standards of grocery workers, is working to smother grocery workers into submission. Aware that it could not initially pass a contract that would satisfy Safeway's demands, the UFCW first forced workers to remain on the job for a year and a half after the expiration of the last contract, leaving workers without raises even as the cost of living continues to skyrocket, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The UFCW only canceled the contract and raised the possibility of a strike after isolating Safeway workers for eighteen months. During that time, near-unanimous strike authorization votes demonstrated support for a united struggle by grocery workers nationwide. A vote in late June 2019 by 46,000 Southern California

Ralphs, Albertson's and Vons workers passed with 96 percent approval. Twenty-five thousand UFCW Oregon and Southwestern Washington State grocery workers also voted to strike. In April 2019, 31,000 UFCW grocery workers from 240 Stop n' Shop stores across New England walked out on strike for 10 days before the union ordered them back to work upon the announcement of a tentative agreement. Yesterday, UFCW Local 400 in the Washington, DC area held a rally at which it announced a date for a strike vote.

Despite the determination of workers to oppose these cuts, the UFCW has rammed through one concession contract after another. At Stop n' Shop, the UFCW asserted that workers would not even receive the full contract until after it had been ratified. In Southern California, the UFCW refused to call a strike and instead imposed a contract in September without publicly releasing vote totals, claiming only that it passed "overwhelmingly." The UFCW Local 1167 website still has not released the full contents of this contract. Oregon and southwest Washington-based UFCW Local 555 announced that their contract had been ratified, again without providing vote totals, on October 11, without calling a strike.

This demonstrates that the role of the UFCW, whose International President Anthony Perrone made \$341,398 in official salary last year, is to divide workers and deliver the desired cuts to management.

A strike by Safeway workers would meet with powerful support. Seventy miles to the south of San Francisco, hundreds of graduate students at the University of California-Santa Cruz are on wildcat strike against miserable wages that are little better than those of Safeway workers. That strike is taking place in defiance of the UAW, which negotiated a poverty contract that stripped them of the right to strike.

To defeat the UFCW's tactic of isolating workers, Safeway workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the UFCW. Such committees will form the basis of a broader movement of the entire working class in defense of living standards.



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