

West Virginia Kroger workers reject sellout agreement, vote overwhelmingly to strike

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In West Virginia, workers for the grocery and retail giant, Kroger, have resoundingly rejected a pro-company sellout agreement which sought to impose higher health care costs and eliminate or reduce certain benefits for senior employees. In addition, workers have signaled their determination to defend their interests by voting overwhelmingly for strike action.

The proposed contract, which covers the Charleston-area Kroger stores, was rejected 1,551–130. The current contract, which was ratified in 2017, expired on August 29, but has been extended indefinitely while the company and the union continue to negotiate.

Under the proposed agreement, Kroger would place a cap on the amount of money it contributes to health care benefits, placing more of the burden on its employees. Beginning in 2021, this cap would be 10 percent, and by 2023 it would be lowered to 8 percent.

According to the *Herald-Dispatch*, Paula Ginnett, president of Kroger's Mid-Atlantic division which oversees West Virginia, said that the proposal "included a \$20 million wage investment that would allow associates to grow their hourly pay. Some associates, she said, could improve their rate by up to \$4.65 per hour depending upon their position during the life of the next contract." The reality is that the company's increased pay offering will hardly alter the fact that Kroger workers receive poverty wages.

For the average full-time Kroger worker, the current contract lists starting pay as a meager \$8.75 per hour, with increases every six months, capping out at \$15.26 after 72 months. Under the proposed agreement, pay increases would take place on a yearly basis (referred to in the contract as "levels" numbering 1–4, with 4 being the maximum). For new hires on or after Nov. 1, 2020, starting pay would be \$10 per hour. By 2023, a level 4 worker will cap out at \$15 per hour. If they are "red

circled," they will cap out at \$16.16 per hour. In the end, these small pay increases will be unable to offset the increased health care costs.

The move by Kroger to increase health care costs for its workers, under conditions of a global pandemic which has claimed the lives of over 230,000 people in the US alone, is an outright provocation. To date, West Virginia has over 30,000 total cases and 553 deaths. Now with the reopening of schools and the continuous erosion of basic safety measures, cases in the state have begun to surge.

Kanawha County, where Charleston, the state capital and largest city is located, accounts for the majority of the state's cases, with over 4,000, and the highest total deaths with 117. Nearby Logan County has the second highest, with 48 deaths.

The union representing West Virginia Kroger workers is the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 400. Fearing an explosion of working class anger in response to the company's efforts to attack workers' living standards, the union was forced to hold a strike authorization vote in order to save face in the eyes of its membership, as well as to buy more time to conspire with the company on a new sellout agreement.

Despite workers voting 1,490–199 in favor of strike action, the union will do everything possible to avoid a strike. This was pointed out by Kroger Mid-Atlantic Corporate Affairs Manager Allison McGee, who said, "Associates are continuing to report to work as scheduled. A strike authorization doesn't mean a strike. At this point, the union has not called for a work stoppage."

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to James, a worker in Virginia for the supermarket chain Giant, who is also a member of UFCW Local 400.

James was angered by the effort to attack Kroger workers' health care, commenting, "They [Kroger] can afford anything. It's had record profits during the pandemic."

James stated that, after having his hazard pay eliminated while the pandemic still raged, he and other employees had received a mere \$150 "bonus" from the corporation. "Even this was taxed," he said, noting that when all was said and done, he only received \$108. "Now they want to come after [workers'] health care? F— that! We should all be on strike over this outrageous attack."

The WSWs also spoke with a Kroger worker in Nashville, Tennessee. He remarked, "It's awful, however, it isn't surprising. Kroger isn't known for its compassion, at least not among its employees. Some companies try to be profitable by making their employees proud to work for them (or so I've heard). Kroger is more thuggish about it, for lack of a better word."

In order to defend their interests, the workers in West Virginia must take matters out of the hands of the pro-company UFCW and into their own. Throughout the pandemic, the union has done nothing to safeguard the lives of grocery workers, who, as genuinely essential workers, have been forced to remain on the job throughout the pandemic. It was not until the workers themselves started to take action that the companies began providing personal protective equipment and sanitation products. The Socialist Equality Party encourages all workers to form independent rank-and-file safety committees to protect their lives and defend their interests.



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