3,000 Kroger workers in Arkansas still without a contract after a year

Cordell Gascoigne
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Some 3,000 grocery workers employed by Kroger in the state of Arkansas have gone for nearly a year without a new contract amid ongoing contract negotiations between Kroger and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

Negotiations began in May of 2020 for a new contract covering workers at 29 stores. Kroger is the only unionized grocery chain in Arkansas. The company has offered to "invest" $27 million in wage increases and time-and-a-half pay after 8.5 hours a day. To offset that cost, the company is seeking to shift its workers from a joint company-union benefit fund to a company-run insurance plan.

UFCW Local 2008 President Steve Gelios says the new contract is a takeaway, claiming, "I've never seen a company act like this. We just want a fair contract." He continued, "They're trying to gut that contract that these people have fought for, for 30, 40, 50 years. And we're not going to let that happen." But he concluded, revealing more than he intended, "We're not asking for the moon."

Corporate Affairs manager Teresa Dickerson said, "We believe our offer is fair, and we're willing to work with Local 2008 to make sure that our associates are well taken care of."

Kroger, the fifth largest retailer globally and fourth largest employer in the United States, employs more than 453,000 workers at its 3,000 stores nationwide, earning $121 billion annually. It can easily afford to pay decent wages and benefits to its workers in Arkansas, who average only $11.60 an hour.

Gelios said that under the proposed company plan, the qualification for benefits would require more hours worked per week. Currently, workers need only 20 hours per week to qualify, but under the company proposal, workers would be required to work 27 hours a week, and 36 hours a week for employees with family members on the plan, over a 52-week period. This would effectively disqualify any worker who misses 10 or more days that year—coercing workers to not take vacations and work virtually nonstop for paltry wages and rock-bottom benefits.

When the most recent contract offer was put to a vote, more than 92 percent of workers rejected it. But the UFCW still refuses to call a strike, with Gelios claiming, "We're prepared for it. I've got strike authorization and strike sanction from our international. We've got picket schedules ready to go."

Nonetheless, no action has been taken, with both Kroger and the UFCW agreeing that "no one wins in a strike." Instead, the UFCW, for nearly a year, has been blocking a potential strike. Kroger, meanwhile, is preparing for potential strike action by hiring replacement workers, or scabs, at $14 an hour.

Gelios, who has a gross salary of $128,445, according to the Department of Labor, earns more than four times the annual income of the average Kroger worker. He is well paid for his attempts to avoid any and all strike action, despite having "strike authorization," "strike sanction from [UFCW] international" and "picket schedules ready to go."

The UFCW plays a critical role in suppressing opposition among meatpacking workers. After a wildcat strike broke out at the JBS meatprocessing facility in Greeley, Colorado last year, UFCW Local 7 demonstrated its disavowal by declaring the strike violated terms in the contract.

The union did nothing to fight the invocation of the Defense Production Act by Republican President Donald Trump last April, which forbade the meat industry from shutting down or slowing production in the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, effectively

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converting processing facilities into vectors for the disease. More than 334,000 cases of COVID-19 have been contact-traced back to meatprocessing facilities.

The UFCW has a presence in the meatpacking industry—Tyson Foods, JBS, Smithfield Foods, Hormel Foods—but refused to call for a strike to save lives. The Democratic administration of Joe Biden is continuing the Defense Production Act order to keep open the meatpacking plants.

Among grocery workers, nearly 400 Kroger warehouse workers in Memphis, Tennessee walked off the job in March 2020 to protest grueling 96-hour-a-week work shifts and unsafe working conditions as COVID-19 tore through the state. Tennesses now has more than 829,000 cases and 12,055 deaths. However, the UFCW brought this protest to an end.

Last November, Kroger workers in West Virginia rejected a contract by a near-92 percent margin, similar to the vote in Arkansas, but the UFCW demonstrated its traitorous role by keeping workers on the job without a contract in the midst of a deadly pandemic, only to sign a "deal" the workers had previously, and overwhelmingly, rejected.

Kroger ended its hazard pay in May 2020, around the time the Arkansas contract ended. The company ended up spending $211 million in stock buybacks during the second quarter of 2020, then announced a further $1 billion in stock buybacks later that year in September.

Since March 1, 2021, the number of grocery-retail workers infected or exposed to COVID-19 has increased by 24 percent and deaths 30 percent, following outbreaks at "Whole Foods Markets, Costco Wholesale, Trader Joe's and other grocery retail chains across the country," according to a UFCW report published April 22.

According to SuperMarketNews.com, "Among UFCW members nationwide, there have been a total of 456 deaths from COVID-19 and at least 91,400 infections or exposures to the virus among frontline workers. UFCW said its latest estimates include 178 deaths and at least 39,900 infections or exposures among grocery workers; 132 deaths and 22,200 infections or exposures among meatpacking workers; and 50 deaths and 11,700 infections or exposures among food processing workers."

Overall, UFCW represents 1.3 million workers in the grocery store, food processing, meatpacking, health care, and retail sectors, but has acted as a bulwark to block worker opposition from growing and spreading. Kroger workers must form rank-and-file committees independent of union oversight and link up with their striking brothers and sisters in the United States—spanning all industries—and abroad, on the basis of a socialist program, opposed to the capitalist parties and their politics.

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