

Justice for Evan Seyfried! Oppose workplace harassment and the lifting of COVID-19 safety measures!

Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
1 October 2021

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which includes educators in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Ohio, wishes to express its condolences to the family, friends and coworkers of Evan Seyfried. Seyfried was a Kroger grocery store worker alleged to have suffered systemic and repeated abuse and psychological torture by his right-wing manager for his insistence on wearing a mask to work during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The result of this unrelenting abuse, many months in the making, was suicide.

Workers at Kroger and throughout the food and service industry must draw lessons from Seyfried's tragic death. The alleged abuse of Evan was only a particularly brutal expression of the enforcement of unsafe working conditions during the pandemic, combined with an unjust exercise of power by a supervisor, and the complicity, if not outright endorsement, of the company.

A lawsuit filed by Seyfried's father specifically names store manager Shannon Frazee and assistant manager Joe Pigg as the parties responsible for his son's death, but the abuse by managers was only possible because of the policies pursued by the company and the indifference of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union to the working conditions of its dues-paying members.

Kroger, the largest grocery store chain in the US with approximately 2,600 stores and 465,000 employees, has a history of employee abuse and disregard for COVID-19 safety protocols, including mask mandates, social distancing, providing supplies and time for proper disinfection of surfaces, and purposeful failure to communicate with workers about possible workplace exposures. So many stores are guilty of ignoring basic

safety measures, in fact, that it cannot be chalked up to the individual stores themselves, or even their managers. Corporate policy is the driving force behind so many dysfunctional stores and store managers.

The Kroger stores in Ohio, Virginia, Texas and Indiana, for example, have made efforts to prevent their employees from wearing masks, and many stores fail to provide basic sanitary products which lead to workplaces being inadequately disinfected. In stores across multiple states, Kroger workers are not told about potential or likely exposures, and management knowingly allows employees to report to work after a positive COVID-19 test. Likewise, employees allege that the Little Clinic in some Kroger stores allows admittance to those with likely signs of COVID-19, thereby potentially infecting workers and customers alike.

Adding insult to injury, Kroger has made every effort to curtail "hero" pay for frontline workers during the pandemic, up to and including sending letters to many employees demanding repayment.

In California, three stores, two Ralphs and one Food 4 Less, both subsidiaries of The Kroger Company, opted to permanently shut their doors to avoid pandemic pay increases, laying off 250 employees. And in the Milford, Ohio, Kroger store in which Evan Seyfried worked, the company fired employees to avoid paying them their "hero" pay.

These heartless measures have been implemented while the supermarket giant's revenues increased from \$122.29 billion in 2019 to \$132.5 billion in 2020, and CEO Rodney McMullen was awarded a 6 percent raise in 2021, increasing his annual compensation to \$22.4 million. Meanwhile, the median Kroger employee's

pay has decreased 8 percent to \$24,600.

As the company endorses abuse against its employees and an overall lack of safety in its individual stores, the UFCW has done nothing to fight for workers' rights and safety. Despite countless grievances filed by employees and a multitude of OSHA violations, the UFCW remains largely silent on matters of worker safety.

The union officials are indifferent to the conditions facing workers because they have maintained or increased their standard of living even as the rank-and-file members have suffered. The salary of UFCW International President Anthony Marc Perrone, for example, tops \$300,000, with an additional over \$30,000 in benefits and other perks. Among the list of UFCW office holders, there are well over 100 individuals whose salaries are over \$100,000.

While everything is done to make workers at Kroger and throughout the food and service industry feel weak and isolated, the reality is that workers across the US and internationally are standing up to oppose similar exploitative and unsafe conditions.

The teachers and faculty members of our committee from Maryland, Pennsylvania and Ohio have been deeply moved by the tragic and unnecessary death of Seyfried. We also believe that the only way to end the pandemic is through the working class coming together and demanding a scientific policy be implemented to eradicate COVID-19.

For this reason, we urge workers throughout the food and service industry to build rank-and-file committees as a means of organizing against the abusive actions of management and indifference of the unions.

We invite you to attend the next meeting of our committee in order to build solidarity between educators and grocery workers. Sign up today to receive a link to the meeting and to find out more about establishing rank-and-file committees at your workplace.



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