

10,000 Alberta Superstore workers vote overwhelmingly in favour of strike action

Alexandra Greene, Roger Jordan

7 October 2021

Ten thousand workers employed at Alberta's Real Canadian Superstore grocery stores voted 97 percent in favour of a strike last week, with a strong province-wide voter turnout.

Workers are determined to secure better wages, improvements to unpredictable scheduling practices and protection against COVID-19 infection.

The decisive vote comes as grocery store workers have endured months of highly unsafe conditions during the pandemic, while receiving only poverty wages as compensation. Of Alberta's 40 Superstore locations, there have been COVID-19 outbreaks in at least 30 stores over the course of the pandemic. Several grocery store workers have died after contracting COVID-19 on the job.

The situation has dramatically worsened over the past two months following the July decision by hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) Premier Jason Kenney to dismantle all remaining public health measures. This reckless move has exposed grocery store workers, and all other sections of the working class, to a horrifying fourth wave of the pandemic that has overwhelmed the province's hospitals and resulted in some patients being denied life-saving care.

Loblaws Inc., the nationwide food retailing giant that owns Real Canadian Superstore, as well as several other retail and pharmaceutical chains, announced it would be giving its employees "hero pay" at the start of the pandemic. The measly \$2 per hour wage increase was infamously clawed back just three months later in June 2020.

All the while, Loblaws executives have lavished themselves with gargantuan salaries and bonuses. The 2020 compensation package for Loblaws Executive Chairman Galen G. Weston Jr. amounted to a whopping \$3.55 million, while departing company President Sarah Davis earned an obscene \$6.4 million.

The Superstore workers in Alberta are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, which stated that negotiations with Loblaws have been ongoing for more than a year. Despite this, the union has

made no public indication that it intends to follow through on the strike mandate. On the contrary, it has all but ruled out job action. "Ironically, the point of taking a strike vote is to attempt to avoid a strike," remarked Local 401 Secretary-Treasurer Richelle Stewart.

When interviewed by the *Edmonton Journal*, UFCW Local 401 President Thomas Hesse stated that bargaining was to resume between the union and Loblaws on September 27 and conclude on October 1. In a bargaining update released September 30, Local 401 said talks were progressing slowly.

A September 24 press release by UFCW Local 401 declared, "If the strike commences, your union will be asking you and your family not to shop at Superstore, nor any of the Loblaws-owned businesses such as No Frills, T&T Supermarket, or Shoppers Drug Mart. Unity and solidarity among Local 401 members will be a vital component of running a strong strike campaign."

Such pathetic appeals have nothing to do with "unity and solidarity" but are aimed at giving the union cover in the event of a strike to isolate it and sell it out. "Unity and solidarity" among workers cannot be built by proposing a toothless consumer boycott that will have virtually no impact on a multibillion-dollar corporation like Loblaws, which controls more than a quarter of the grocery retail industry in Canada. Rather, it must be fought for politically.

Superstore workers, who face the daily threat of COVID-19 infection and earn miserably low wages, are in a strong position to take up such a struggle. An appeal by the Superstore workers for a unified fight against attacks on wages and working conditions would find a powerful response from the thousands of nurses in Alberta whose wages are being cut by the UCP government by 5 percent amid the pandemic, or from teachers forced to risk infection on a daily basis in unsafe classrooms. It would be enthusiastically welcomed by the tens of thousands of mostly low-paid public sector workers across the country, especially in New Brunswick, who have just voted by 94 percent in favour of a strike.

The UFCW's record over the past year confirms its bitter hostility to the emergence of a mass working-class movement for better wages and conditions. At every point during the pandemic, the union has endeavoured to keep workers on the job under dangerous conditions and sabotage working-class opposition to the ruling elite's "profits before lives" COVID-19 policy.

In March of this year, the UFCW refused point blank to defend Olymel meatpacking workers, who were recklessly herded into plants plagued by COVID-19 outbreaks of catastrophic proportions. A massive COVID-19 outbreak at Olymel's Red Deer, Alberta plant saw at least 515 workers infected and 4 workers lose their lives.

When the Kenney government greenlighted the re-opening of the Red Deer slaughterhouse and meatpacking operations after a brief shutdown, even as the workforce still grappled with 91 active cases, the union raised no demands for additional safety measures to be taken. In comments to the media at the time, UFCW Local 401 President Thomas Hesse bandied around militant phrases, stating that the company was putting "pigs ahead of people." He claimed to be grieving for the dead workers as much as the other workers in the Red Deer plant but proposed no action to confront the pandemic.

Hesse is employing a similar tactic this time around, posturing as a friend of the workers but proposing absolutely nothing to wage a successful struggle. "I'm seeing people terrified going to work in crowded public places," he told the *Edmonton Journal*. "Their billionaire bosses gave them so-called hero pay and then took that away. It's almost like the employer saw it as a calculation error in their enormous profits."

Hesse's sudden outrage at "billionaire bosses" is for public consumption alone. He calculates that striking a militant pose will place the UFCW in a better position to ram through a rotten concessions contract that has almost certainly already been cooked up with Loblaw's behind the scenes.

He is a master at protecting the UFCW's relations with the corporate elite and the state. In the spring of 2020, after three meatpackers died at Cargill's High River plant and over 900 were infected, Hesse refused to support the highly exploited workforce in taking any job action to prevent a premature return to work. Under conditions where the virus was still spreading, Hesse asserted that any job action would be "illegal" under the workers' collective agreement. Given the choice between protecting the "legality" of collective bargaining, i.e., the corrupt partnership between corporate bosses and union officials, or workers' lives, Hesse and the UFCW bureaucracy chose the former.

As for its role in the food retail sector, the UFCW has been

instrumental in allowing a steady worsening in workers' wages and conditions. In 1990, the union set the bar for the destruction of full-time grocery jobs when it allowed Loblaw's in Ontario to do away with across-the-board wage increases in favour of a new wage structure tied to hours worked.

In 1993, union executives convinced workers it represented in Alberta's Safeway grocery chain that the company would close stores if they did not accept wage and job cuts and concede to the company's right to employ a virtually unlimited number of part-time workers.

Far from being exceptional, the UFCW's record of imposing low wages and precarious conditions over the past 30 years in the food retail sector is of a piece with what the trade union bureaucracy has done throughout all sectors of the economy. This is why Superstore workers must break from the UFCW if they are to take their struggle forward.

The first step in this process will be the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee tasked with fulfilling the overwhelming mandate given by the grocery store workers for a province-wide strike. The committee would demand the full disclosure of what has been agreed in the backroom talks between the UFCW and Loblaw's. It would allow workers to raise demands starting from what they actually need, not what the employer claims is affordable, including a substantial wage increase, COVID-19 protections on the job and an end to temporary, insecure employment.

To conduct a successful strike and achieve their demands against a corporate giant like Loblaw's, including the safeguarding of frontline workers' lives during the pandemic, Superstore workers require the broadest support from all sections of the working class. They must unify their struggle with grocery store workers across Canada and North America, Dana auto parts workers and Kellogg cereal factory workers fighting sweatshop conditions in the United States, and educators and health care workers, who are bearing the brunt of the pandemic. This is the only way to win decent-paying, secure jobs for all, and prioritize the safeguarding of workers' lives instead of corporate profits amid the COVID-19 pandemic.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact