

14,000 Houston-area Kroger workers authorize strike

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About 14,000 Kroger workers in the Houston area could go on strike within the next week as they fight America's largest grocery chain over wages, health care and staffing levels.

Negotiations between Kroger and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 455 have continued throughout the pandemic after the union contract expired in April 2020. The union said the company's proposals do not provide workers with adequate pay or health care.

Union officials held a vote on Kroger's most recent proposal at over 100 Houston locations this weekend. The union reported that "a record-breaking number of members" had cast votes, and 97 percent of them had rejected the contract and authorized the union to call a strike.

"With this vote, Kroger grocery workers are sending a clear message that they are ready to stand up for the good pay, lower prescription costs, and quality healthcare they have earned on the frontlines of this pandemic," UFCW Local 455 President Brandon Hopkins said in a statement.

Hopkins also went on to say, "To be clear, a strike is always a last resort. Our hope is that Kroger will do the right thing and put Houston families first by returning to the negotiating table."

Workers also overwhelmingly voted to strike last November, but union officials decided to continue fruitless negotiations. At the time, the union said they wanted to give workers another opportunity to weigh in before taking the step to strike. These empty gestures are clearly not aimed at pressuring management, but at confusing and wearing down the resistance of workers.

Earlier this week, Kroger's Houston division posted a notice to its website telling workers that, "It's business as usual: Strike authorization does not mean a strike.

Report to work according to your regular schedule."

Kroger said in a statement it was focused on reaching an agreement and claimed it has already proposed \$56 million in wage increases in response to negotiations.

'We have offered a contract that respects our associates by significantly investing in their total compensation, industry leading healthcare, and seeks zero concessions,' said Clara Campbell, Kroger's regional corporate affairs manager.

"This is the third time UFCW Local 455 has asked its members to authorize a strike and potentially disrupt their lives during the middle of a pandemic," Campbell said. "The most productive thing the union can do is to work with the company to reach an agreement and end the bargaining deadlock."

Kroger has done exceptionally well during the pandemic. According to the company's website, its total sales grew by over \$10 billion from 2019 to 2020. Excluding fuel and asset dispositions, total sales grew 14.2 percent. Rather than channeling this money into higher wages or better working conditions, Kroger returned \$1.9 billion to shareholders and repurchased \$1.32 billion of its own shares in 2020 under its board authorizations, a move aimed at inflating its stock price.

The company saw its fourteenth consecutive year of dividend increases in 2020, resulting in a payout of \$534 million to its shareholders. Kroger CEO William Rodney McMullen was given a compensation package of more than \$20.6 million, along with a \$6.4 million raise.

The UFCW has played a pivotal role in this. Throughout the pandemic, the union has worked to keep Kroger and other grocery and food processing workers on the job at whatever the cost to workers' health. While it stonewalls strike action, the union has

seen a \$66 million increase in the value of its financial investments since the pandemic began.

Kroger workers should take a warning from the treacherous role the UFCW played in the strike by 400 workers at the Heaven Hill Distillery in Kentucky, who faced management demands they give up a traditional 5-day workweek and accept increases in insurance premiums. After five weeks on strike the UFCW called a snap vote on a new contract, without allowing workers a proper chance to review the agreement. Even though workers voted by a majority to reject the deal, the UFCW declared it ratified because it did not meet the required two thirds super-majority required for rejection.

To win their fight, Kroger workers need to take their struggle into their own hands by forming their own independent rank-and-file committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers themselves. Workers must link their struggle with that of other workers, such as striking Kellogg workers and Kroger and other food workers nationally and internationally. The *World Socialist Web Site* will assist workers who want to take up this fight.



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