

Fred Meyer and QFC grocery workers in Portland set to strike Friday

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16 December 2021

Grocery store workers at chains Fred Meyer and Quality Food Centers (QFC), which are owned by the supermarket giant Kroger, are set to begin a strike in the Portland, Oregon, metro area Friday morning, after voting by 97 percent last weekend to authorize a walkout.

Better pay and safety issues are central among workers' demands, as grocery store employees have been working on the front lines of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic for the last two years. In what is undoubtedly only a partial indication of the spread of the virus, the Oregon Health Authority currently lists four active outbreaks involving 51 COVID-19 cases at Fred Meyer locations in the state: three at stores in Portland, Canby and Oregon City, and one at a distribution center in Clackamas.

It is unclear at the time of this writing how many workers would be involved in the strike. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555 boasted in a press release that they represent 29,000 essential workers in Oregon and southwest Washington. However, the UFCW is planning to keep Fred Meyer and QFC workers isolated from other members of the local, including grocery workers at Albertsons and Safeway, even though contract talks at these companies are also ongoing.

The union has kept Fred Meyer workers on the job for months despite contracts expiring in July and is seeking to keep the strike narrowly confined to issues of "unfair labor practices," saying in a statement, "Fred Meyer and QFC have repeatedly violated their legal duties to negotiate in good faith with Local 555, with the most blatant example being Fred Meyer's refusal to provide information necessary for the Union to negotiate a new agreement and to process grievances."

Fred Meyer, for its part, released a company

statement on Sunday saying, "It's business as usual at Fred Meyer. A strike authorization doesn't mean a strike."

While company officials tout average wages of \$17.29 per hour in Oregon, workers are feeling the rapid increase in the cost of living as well as the added risk of being in a workplace with increased danger of daily exposure to the virus.

As with other essential workers cynically lauded as "heroes" by corporate public relations departments, workers at Fred Meyer received hazard pay for only a brief period, totaling around \$1,000-1,600 before the company ended the practice in May 2020, according to the *Portland Mercury*.

Fred Meyer's parent company Kroger, however, has been making immense amounts of money during the pandemic. In the third quarter of 2021, Kroger had sales of \$31.9 billion, up 2.9 percent from the same quarter last year, with operating profits of \$868 million. In 2020, Kroger's net earnings were \$2.59 billion.

COVID-19 cases are on the rise with both the Delta variant and now the much more contagious Omicron variant spreading rapidly. A worker recently died at a Fred Meyer store in Burien, Washington, during an outbreak that saw 10 other workers also test positive for the virus. Among them was Sharelle Claiborne, who is still recovering. Claiborne told local NPR affiliate KUOW, "I'm scared to go back to work." She said that cleaning crews regularly cleaned the stores and carts were wiped down at the start of the pandemic, but those precautionary efforts had been waning in recent months.

The UFCW has spent the last 40 years isolating and betraying strikes, like the bitter 1985-86 Hormel strike, and has played a central role in the declining wages and living standards of grocery and meatpacking workers

who once made a decent living.

Even more criminally, the UFCW has forced workers to continue laboring and producing profits in deadly conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. By the union's own count, nearly 500 of its members had died from the coronavirus and close to 100,000 had been infected by April 2021, before the more infectious and deadlier Delta variant began to surge throughout the US.

In October, workers at Real Canadian Superstores in Alberta voted for strike authorization, but UFCW Local 401 allowed a strike for less than a week before forcing workers back to work and recommending a vote on a contract with details yet to be finalized at the time. UFCW Local 401 Secretary-Treasurer Richelle Stewart essentially discarded any notion of actually waging a struggle against Real Canadian Superstores, saying, "Ironically, the point of taking a strike vote is to attempt to avoid a strike."

Today UFCW "represents" approximately 1.3 million workers and has over \$398 million in assets. Anthony "Marc" Perrone, International President of UFCW, made over \$300,000 last year, placing him and fellow union executives in a socio-economic layer far removed from day-to-day concerns of food and grocery workers.

There is broad support among workers for a serious struggle for decent living standards, against corporate attacks on wages, safety, and jobs, and against the continued sacrifice of lives for profits. In order to win their struggle, workers should follow the example of workers at John Deere, Volvo, Kaiser and elsewhere and form rank-and-file committees. Such organizations will provide the means by which workers can formulate their own demands, and allow them to link up with grocery workers across North America, as well as Kellogg workers, educators, autoworkers, and health care workers and others, in a fight for the common interests of the working class.



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