

# Colorado King Soopers grocery workers authorize strike in nearly unanimous vote

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King Soopers grocery workers from 87 stores in Colorado in the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 7 voted almost unanimously to strike over the past week. Denver meat and retail workers voted in favor by 97 and 98 percent, respectively. In Colorado Springs, meat workers voted by 97 percent and retail workers by 95 percent. Meat workers in Parker and Boulder and Broomfield meat and retail workers all voted by 100 percent.

The current contract with King Soopers is set to expire on January 8. Workers have been told by the union to continue reporting to work until further notice, as talks with management continue ahead of the expiration. UFCW 7 issued a statement early Wednesday stating that the existing contract would not be extended, suggesting 8,400 workers could walk off the job as soon as Sunday.

If workers are to go on strike it will be the first grocery workers strike in the Denver area since 1996, when over 14,000 King Soopers workers went on strike for 42 days in opposition to plans to cut health care by 20 percent.

The strike vote was held as the union filed a lawsuit against Kroger, owner of King Soopers, accusing the grocery chain giant of committing unfair labor practices. Central to the lawsuit is the practice of King Soopers hiring temporary non-union workers, which the union claims is in violation of a contract clause stating that only janitorial staff may be contracted out to non-union workers. Temporary employees have been offered an \$18-an-hour starting wage, significantly higher than the current starting wage of \$12.35 for clerks. The use of temporary workers to dilute union membership is a common tactic of companies to circumvent union contracts and build up a reserve scab workforce in the event of a strike.

Currently, 42 percent of King Soopers workers are non-union. However, with staffing shortages placing strain on many stores already, it is unlikely that temporary employees will be enough to keep stores fully operational in the event of a strike.

UFCW 7 has also said that the company refuses to respond to workers' demands, including calls for the reinstatement of pandemic hazard pay, which was rescinded last summer.

Based on details on the contract proposal released by the union, it would allow the company to reduce real wages during the contract, implement a new form of two-tier employment, cut health care benefits, and allow temporary workers to receive seniority in shift scheduling.

In terms of pay, workers on the lowest rungs of the pay scale would receive just a 13-cent raise, and many workers will be forced down the wage scale even if they have been employed for several years.

For the most senior workers making a maximum wage of \$19.51 an hour, the contract includes a 50-cent raise each year during the four-year contract, rising to \$21.51 by 2025. This raise comes out to 2.5 percent a year, well below the current 6.8 percent inflation rate, making it an effective pay cut.

The outcome of the strike vote is part of a rapidly growing wave of resistance to brutal working conditions made worse by the coronavirus pandemic. The vote overlapped with a vote by tens of thousands of Chicago teachers on Monday to return to virtual-only learning to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant in schools. City Democrats responded by locking teachers out without pay, while the corporate press is waging a hysterical campaign attempting to blackguard teachers and demanding action against them by the Biden administration.

After two years of a deadly pandemic, which according to the UFCW has killed at least five Kroger and King Soopers grocery workers in the area, workers are ready to recoup some of the \$4 billion in profit made by Kroger in 2021.

But the UFCW, on the other hand, has been working hand-in-glove with companies across the country to enforce concessions against the opposition of its members. In November 2020 14,000 West Virginia Kroger workers voted to strike by 92 percent. But instead, the UFCW forced through a concessions contract nearly identical to the one workers wanted to strike against two weeks later.

Just last month, the UFCW blocked a strike by Cargill workers with a tentative agreement it forced workers to vote on before they had the chance to study the contract. Despite voting down a nearly identical contract by 98 percent a week before, workers were effectively forced into accepting the same inadequate conditions dictated by the company.

Most significant has been the UFCW's role in keeping meatpacking plants open, in spite of the fact that nearly 60,000 meatpacking workers have contracted covid and 298 have died, according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network. At the Tyson chicken processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa, more than a third of all workers were infected and six died of COVID-19 during the initial wave in the spring of 2020. The UFCW not only helped to cover up the extent of the outbreak from the public, it even collaborated with management to implement a \$500 "perfect attendance" bonus. Management at the plant, meanwhile, set up a private betting pool on the number of workers who would eventually become infected.

UFCW Local 7 is the same local that covers thousands of beef processing workers at the JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado, where six workers have died. Fed up with inaction by the union, workers at the plant walked out in the summer of 2020, to which the union responded with a circular instructing workers to return to their jobs.

Local 7 sought to palm responsibility off on workers themselves, blaming them for accepting concessions in previous contracts the local itself had brought to a vote. In a letter to union members about the company's proposed contract, the UFCW wrote, "If you were hired after 2005, the reason you have fewer benefits is

because workers accepted a sell-out bonus from the Company and two-tier came with that bonus. Don't make that same mistake!"

The UFCW is well compensated for enforcing these concessions. Across both the national and local level, it reported more than \$1.1 billion in assets to the Department of Labor last year, making it the 10th wealthiest union in America. Kim Cordova, president of UFCW Local 7, makes more than \$200,000 a year. Kevin Williamson, director of the national bargaining committee, takes in an annual salary of \$369,500. In total, there are 171 UFCW officials who make more than \$100,000 a year from member dues.

King Soopers workers are in a powerful position, and a strike would reverberate among workers throughout the state and even the country. But as long as the initiative remains in the hands of the union bureaucracy, they will seek to enforce a betrayal which accepts all of management's demands. Workers must draw the lessons and form new organizations, rank-and-file committees controlled democratically by workers themselves, to fight for their own demands and appeal for the broadest possible support for their struggle.



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