

Colorado grocery workers prepare for three-week strike against King Soopers supermarket chain

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Roughly 8,400 grocery store workers at nearly 80 King Soopers supermarkets in Colorado will launch a strike next Wednesday. The United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7 has announced that the strike will last three weeks, ending on February 2.

The strike will include workers from across Colorado's Front Range region at the state's largest grocery chain, affecting stores in Denver, Boulder, Parker and Colorado Springs. King Soopers employees in the western part of the state will not participate as their contract does not expire until later this winter.

The announcement of the strike came after a concessionary contract was rejected by the bargaining committee and the company refused to respond to the union's counteroffer. The company's offer would have included minor pay increases offset with cuts to benefits. It also failed to re-implement pandemic hazard pay and address safety concerns. The union has also filed a lawsuit against King Soopers accusing the company of unfair labor practices by using third-party contractors to hire temporary nonunion workers.

The strike would be part of a growing wave of workers' opposition to ruthless exploitation over the course of the pandemic. The announcement came following a strike vote earlier this week in which workers voted nearly unanimously in favor. That vote came amid major upsurges by teachers across the country determined to shut down unsafe schools during the Omicron surge. Chicago teachers voted on Monday to return to remote-only instruction, and educators across the San Francisco Bay Area have carried out sickouts to demand a pause in reopening.

An attitude of militancy was expressed by workers on social media. "I am ready to walk out when we go on strike," said one worker. "Let's do it. It's time to fight against the company. It's time to get what we want." Another replied, "My boyfriend is a semi driver, [and] he is refusing any loads going to King Soopers in support of us. A lot of people have our backs; we are STRONG!"

However, workers also expressed suspicion of the UFCW bureaucracy. Another worker said, "UFCW—please do not FOLD on us, union brothers and sisters please do not FOLD on us! We deserve every bit of what we're asking for!"

Kroger, which owns King Soopers, is the largest grocery store chain in the United States and brought in \$132.5 billion in revenue in 2021—an average of \$285,000 per worker. Its CEO, Rodney McMullen, took in \$20.6 million in 2020, a \$6.4 million raise from the previous year. Yet the average pay for a Kroger worker in 2020 was just \$15.50 an hour, or just under \$30,000 a year.

At King Soopers, starting pay for clerks in Denver is \$12.35, with a maximum wage of \$19.51 after four years of full-time work.

The company's most recent offer would have raised the starting wage to \$16 an hour, just 13 cents above Denver's new minimum wage, which took effect on New Year's Day. The maximum wage would rise to \$22.11 an hour, an improvement from their previous offer but still woefully inadequate to what King Soopers workers need.

In total, the company's offer amounted to a wage and benefit investment of just \$148 million over three years. In that same time Kroger will make close to \$8 billion in profits.

Additionally, King Soopers is offering \$18 an hour to hire scabs during the strike, demonstrating that the company has the capacity to offer more but simply refuses to do so.

In return, the union has issued a counterproposal calling for an increase to the starting wage of all workers by at least \$6 an hour, raising the starting wage to \$18.35, plus a \$1.50 wage increase in the second and third years of contract on top of the standard wage progression scheme. Additional demands include improvements in safety, prohibiting outsourcing to third-party vendors and improved health benefits.

So far the union has only released a vague list of contract highlights for their proposal for a three-year deal. However,

based on available details workers should demand even more. Even with the wage increases proposed by the union, the current inflation rate of 6.8 percent will quickly erase those gains without a guaranteed cost-of-living adjustment, and the proposal is not clear about a permanent abolition of two-tier employment.

This is further shown by Kroger's announced \$1 billion stock buyback program on December 31, just days before the strike votes began. This buyback program will go towards further enriching some of the wealthiest people on the planet, using money made from the labor and sacrifice of King Soopers and other Kroger workers around the country.

King Soopers workers are in a powerful position to win their demands, especially as the US labor shortage continues. Barely 200,000 jobs were created in December, and the retail trade saw a decline in the total number of workers. Despite efforts by the company to hire scab labor, it is possible that King Soopers stores will not be able to hire enough workers to maintain full operations.

Regardless, the local press and workers have noted a significant outpouring of support from the community pledging to not cross the picket line. Local residents commenting on social media expressed a commitment to support the striking workers, with many noting that they would rather travel significantly farther to shop at another store than cross the picket line.

Most significantly, the contracts for workers at Safeway grocery stores in the area were originally set to expire throughout January and February. If Safeway workers were to join their fellow workers at King Soopers, it would strike a massive blow to two of the largest grocery chains in Colorado, making up a combined 45 percent of the grocery market share in Denver.

However, rather than call out Safeway workers to join the strike, the UFCW extended their contract in the Denver area in order to "allow the Union time to secure an industry leading contract for Safeway/Albertsons workers." The contract for Denver clerks and meat department workers was set to expire on January 8.

The extension is not to secure a better contract but to keep the Safeway and King Soopers workers isolated in order to weaken both. While the UFCW has been compelled to call a strike and engage in certain "militant" rhetoric, the union officialdom, which controls more than \$1 billion in assets, is terrified of an explosion from below and will seek to wear down workers and shut down the strike as soon as possible. Indeed, this is why the union has arbitrarily limited the strike in advance to three weeks, leaving in the hands of management as much initiative and advance notice as possible in order to weather the strike.

It can also not be excluded that the union will seek to call

off the strike at the last minute and enforce a sellout contract, as the IATSE union did to a planned strike of 60,000 film production workers and the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) did to 32,000 health care workers in Southern California.

Indeed, the UFCW has been among the most the brazen of all the pro-corporate trade unions in sacrificing the health and lives of their own members on behalf of private profit. The union has kept meatpacking workers on the job throughout the pandemic which has allowed infections to spread unabated in cramped, unsanitary facilities, leading to nearly 60,000 infections and 300 deaths. In the summer of 2020, beef workers at a JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado, were forced to take matters into their own hands with a wildcat walkout after months of inaction by UFCW Local 7.

In order to carry forward and expand their struggle, workers must prepare themselves to challenge the isolation and betrayals of the UFCW by forming a rank-and-file strike committee. Such an organization will place the direction of the strike in the hands of the workers themselves not the union bureaucrats.

Contact should be made with other grocery workers and across sectors, especially with teachers, who also face low pay and dangerous working conditions during the pandemic. By unifying the struggles of other workers in Colorado and across the country, workers can build a powerful strike movement to win all of their demands, including not just better pay and benefits but also improved safety in the fight to eliminate COVID-19 and end the pandemic.

We encourage all King Soopers and Colorado grocery store workers to contact us for help in establishing rank-and-file committees in your area.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact