Thousands of Colorado grocery workers strike at King Soopers as opposition continues to build in the working class

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Thousands of workers at King Soopers grocery chain stores in Colorado began a three-week strike Wednesday morning at 64 stores from south Denver to Boulder. The workers are members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 7.

Support for the strike is high among workers in the area. A striking worker from Centennial, Colorado, said that customer traffic was just 10 percent of normal and that they received considerable support from community members. The company has been attempting to bring in scab workers at $18 an hour, but workers report that few people have taken the jobs. Instead, the company has resorted to flying in salaried workers from out of state in a desperate bid to keep shelves stocked for the few people who cross the picket line.

King Soopers, a subsidiary of Kroger, the largest grocery chain in the country, offered workers a pitiful contract that would have seen starting wages rise to just 13 cents above minimum wage and would have included concessions in health care benefits as well as the ability to lower workers' wages at any time during the contract.

On Tuesday, the union stated that it would not accept King Soopers "last, best, and final offer," which included only modest adjustments, notably the inclusion of a "favored nation" clause, which would have automatically lowered negotiated wages and benefits to the level of the lowest deal negotiated by the union with another company.

The union's counteroffer includes a $6 raise for all workers, raising the starting wage to $18.35, and an additional $1.50 raise in the second and third year of the contract.

For the Denver area, the proposed wage increases are fairly modest. Denver is one of the most expensive metro areas in the country. The average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Denver is $2,400, up 16.5 percent from last year, while the current maximum wage of a King Soopers worker is just $3,100 a month. According to the MIT living wage calculator, a worker supporting a family of four would need to make $36 an hour to have a living wage in Denver.

Kroger has made impressive profits on the basis of poverty wages for its workforce. A recent study conducted by the Economic Roundtable on the living conditions of Kroger workers in Colorado, Southern California, and the Seattle metro area found that two-thirds of Kroger workers struggle to afford basic necessities.

On average, a Kroger employee makes $16,000 less than needed to survive, with 29 percent of all grocery workers in the US living below the poverty line. Since 1990, wages for the most senior workers have declined between 11 and 22 percent, adjusted for inflation. Up to 78 percent of workers live with low to very-low food security and there are startling rates of homelessness among all age groups and seniority levels.

A Kroger worker from Seattle, referred to as Jim to protect his identity, spoke to the WSWS about the living conditions of Kroger workers after 15 years in the industry.

"The top end of a union job here is $22.15. Which I know seems like a lot, but on a 40-hour-a-week job even that's around $3,544 a month before taxes, union dues, etc. Rent for a one-bedroom apartment can range from $1,500 to over $2,000 and it keeps going up. With the requirement of making 3x the rent to even qualify

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for an apartment, the top-scale employees can have a hard time.

"Food, gas, rent—it's all starting to exceed what we can bring in. Plenty of us have roommates or multiple-income households and we still (generally) can't afford to not work because the slight decrease in a paycheck will mean we have to pull money from what little savings we have scraped together or just go without."

Workers in Denver are facing similar circumstances. A striking worker from the Denver metro area who has worked for King Soopers for seven years said, "We're exhausted, frustrated, and insulted on top of it. Even without the concessions, the wage increases aren't even enough to cover how much our rent raised in 2021.

"Like a lot of stores, we're severely understaffed and have had hiring and retention issues for over a year now. Customers are more aggressive, everyone's getting sick, people threaten our service desk clerks nearly daily and every single department has been working overtime just to have this concession-riddled contract shoved in our faces. The vast majority of us are fired up and genuinely excited to strike."

Though workers are ready and willing to fight back, the union took steps to weaken and isolate the strike before it even began. Just days before the strike was set to take place, the union told workers in Colorado Springs to report to work, with no explanation provided. Earlier in the week, the union also extended the contract of workers at Safeway, which had expired over the weekend, separating them from the King Soopers workers.

The decision to isolate workers by company only serves to weaken the strike. It is reminiscent of the General Motors (GM) strike in 2019, when the United Auto Workers (UAW) forced workers at Ford and Fiat Chrysler to remain on the job, even though their contracts, which were patterned after the deal at GM due to the pattern bargaining system, expired at the same time. This enforced isolation allowed the UAW, whose top leadership was under indictment for bribery and embezzlement, to eventually shut down and sell out the strike.

The UFCW, and Local 7 in particular, has played a treacherous role during the pandemic, helping to keep meatpacking and food processing plants open in spite of massive levels of infection. In the summer of 2020, after months of stalling by Local 7, workers at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado, staged a wildcat walkout to force a temporary closure of the facility, where six workers have died. As for King Soopers workers, the two-tier wage system that workers are seeking eliminate was "negotiated" by Local 7 in 2005, and it has limited the current strike in advance to three weeks, allowing the company to make their own preparations to try and weather the strike. The UFCW, which has more than $1 billion in assets nationwide, is a pro-corporate organization ruled over by a privileged bureaucracy. Local 7 President Kim Cordova makes more than $200,000 per year.

"The way UFCW works is they don't actually tell you anything," said Jim. "They keep everything vague and generic until the votes. They say they do this so people don't misunderstand what it means. Then they don't actually present you with a contract at the vote. It's more of a bullet point list with the ability to ask questions. Most people go in, throw the vote in the box, and walk out. So you don't really know what is given and taken. None of it is very clear unless you take the time to read a contract that has already passed."

King Soopers workers should be on guard against the UFCW's inevitable attempt to sell out their struggle and force through a concessions agreement. They must do so by organizing their own independent rank-and-file strike committee to formulate a red line for what workers will accept in any deal, and appeal for active support within the working class, including teachers, meatpacking workers, and others.

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