

Denver area King Soopers strike part of growing wave of opposition in the working class

Alex Findijs
14 January 2022

The strike of over 8,000 workers at the King Soopers supermarket chain in Colorado is continuing into its third day. Striking workers report that stores have been unable to find many scabs to fill positions, and salaried workers brought in from out of state have been inadequate to close the gap. Most shoppers have refused to cross the picket line, and those that do are often greeted by empty shelves and closed departments.

Strike action by King Soopers workers, who are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7, is a demonstration of the growing opposition by workers to corporate exploitation. Kroger, the parent company of King Soopers, made over \$4 billion in profit last year, yet has made every attempt to squeeze as much value out of its employees as it can.

Kroger workers across the country report that they are exhausted and fed up. For years, and especially during the pandemic, they have been consistently been asked to do more work for less pay.

One Kroger worker from Houston told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “It’s very stressful and exhausting. I used to care a lot about my job and trying to get everything right, but over the last few years I just couldn’t do it anymore and gave up. It was the only way I could cope and not have another mental breakdown at work.”

These kinds of conditions are reminiscent of working conditions from a hundred years ago, when workers were driven to the point of exhaustion only to receive barely enough to survive on. Today, two-thirds of Kroger workers cannot afford basic necessities, and one in seven has experienced homelessness while working for the largest grocery chain in the country.

Workers across the country have had enough, from

workers in the auto industry to teachers seeking to oppose poverty wages, brutal working hours, and above all, the sacrificing of their lives to profit during the pandemic.

Striking workers at King Soopers must appeal to and link up with the wide support for their struggle. While the strike is confined to the Denver and Boulder area, it is inspiring and encouraging to workers around the state and across the country.

A Kroger worker from Seattle said, “Kroger makes their entire company off of the blood sweat and tears of its workers. We make the company possible. And we sacrifice everything to do so. Don’t give up. Don’t give in. Don’t settle for less than you deserve, because you’re worth so much more.”

Workers at King Soopers stand at the head of a growing wave of opposition within the working class. Across Colorado, contracts are expiring for grocery and retail workers. Railway workers for BNSF, which has major facilities in Denver, are pressing for strike action against a regressive attendance policy, and 30,000 oil refinery workers at Exxon will see their contract expire on February 1.

But workers are not just fighting the largest supermarket chain in the country, but also the United Food and Commercial Workers union. The UFCW is a pro-corporate outfit with \$1.1 billion in assets and spent \$287 million dollars in 2019, only 1 percent of which went to strike activities. UFCW International President Anthony Perrone makes \$340,000 a year, and UFCW Local 7 President Kim Cordova makes over \$200,000 a year.

The UFCW has spent the past two years forcing workers in food processing and grocery to remain on

the job in spite of mass infections. UFCW Local 7 did nothing to oppose outbreaks at a JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado, except to rent a billboard with the pictures of the six workers who died. Their inaction prompted wildcat actions by workers themselves in the summer of 2020 to force a shutdown.

While the bureaucrats received their salaries from union dues, six workers died of COVID-19 at the JBS meat packing plant in Greeley, Colorado, the same plant where managers placed bets on how many workers would be infected. It would take a wildcat walkout by workers to enforce a temporary closure in 2020, due to a lack of support from UFCW 7.

Among grocery workers, the UFCW has sought to prevent one strike after another and kept workers on the job with expired contracts. In Arkansas, UFCW Local 2008 has kept Kroger workers on the job throughout the state without a contract, except for token job actions at individual locations.

If the UFCW has a strike now, it is because they are terrified that they could lose control entirely over the workers. This also accounts for why the local is paying up to \$800 per week in strike pay for workers who participate in picket duty. However, the union has also capped the strike in advance to three weeks, giving the company advance notice of how long they need to weather the strike.

The UFCW is currently isolating its own workers on the picket line. While workers in Colorado Springs voted nearly unanimously to strike, the union suddenly called off their strike before they were supposed to walk out on Wednesday. Workers were confused and frustrated to learn that they would not be striking and that the union would not provide a clear answer as to why. As of this writing, no explanation has been provided by the union about why workers in Colorado Springs are still at work, and when, or if, they ever will go on strike.

A worker in Colorado Springs told the WSWs that “there was a lot of enthusiasm and eagerness leading up to the strike before we got the news on Sunday that we wouldn't be going out to strike with Denver. That enthusiasm hasn't died out, but I am starting to see that people are growing more confused, anxious, and frustrated as we wait to hear what our plans are going forward. Especially since at this moment in time, we are currently operating without a contract, and won't be

for however long this lasts. All of our union's leadership is currently focusing on Denver. So until they start redirecting their focus on the [Colorado Springs] area, we won't know when a strike will occur.”

In addition, the strike is an unfair labor practices (ULP) strike, a legal-bureaucratic designation which prevents the union from explicitly raising economic demands, instead demanding only that the company “negotiate in good faith.” This gives the union and management an escape clause to end the strike at any time without any agreement, on the grounds that “good faith” negotiations are now taking place.

“[The unions] have had the power and responsibility to make sure this didn't happen [low pay and harsh working conditions],” said one Seattle-area Kroger worker. “It's been a massive failure on their part as well. And they bring in millions in revenue from dues alone and pay out in the ballpark of 25 percent to their own interests and salaries. Not to mention hotels, airfare, donations, political contributions and so forth.”

Another Kroger worker from Texas said, “I feel like the union communication is severely lacking. I've paid into the union for nine years and I don't feel like it's been worth it.”

Workers at King Soopers should draw the lessons from this universal experience and form rank-and-file strike committees in order to enforce workers' control over the struggle and countermand any attempt by the union officials to sabotage their struggle. These committees must also build up the broadest possible unity with workers across Colorado and around the country, calling on them to support their efforts in the fight against the Kroger giant and build a unified movement of the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact