

UFCW shuts down King Soopers grocery store strike in Denver before workers vote on tentative agreement

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Are you a King Soopers worker? Contact the World Socialist Web Site today to discuss your reaction to the shutdown of the strike and the way forward for grocery workers.

In a flagrant sellout, The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) local 7 abruptly announced a tentative agreement with King Soopers early Friday morning, and shut down a 10 day strike by 8,000 workers in the Denver, Colorado area. Strikers were instructed to take down their pickets and to contact their store managers to be put back on the work schedule. Workers will have seven days to report back to work.

In a blatantly anti-democratic procedure, King Soopers workers were instructed to shut down the pickets begin returning to work before they have seen even a single word of the deal, and before the union had even announced a timetable for a vote. Indications are now that the vote will take place throughout the day on Monday, but workers will not have the opportunity to review the contract before the ratification meetings.

Many workers voiced concern and suspicion on social media about the deal. “No, it doesn’t sound right at all,” said one worker. “We should still be striking until we get to vote on the contract. I’m sorry I don’t trust [UFCW 7 President Kim Cordova] right now. And I don’t trust the company.” Another said, “I’ll go back when the contract is officially voted on and ratified. I don’t trust corporations or union bosses. I trust my comrade workers only!”

The vote is being conducted in a way which is clearly designed not to convince workers to support the deal but to intimidate them and present it as a fait accompli. Even the vote itself is designed to suppress voter turnout; two meetings are scheduled to take place at a hotel near the Denver airport more than an hour away from the city center by public transit, and those who have returned to work will have to request unpaid time off from management in order to attend the meeting.

In a “frequently asked questions” flyer posted on its Facebook page, UFCW Local 7 described the voting procedure as little more than a formality. “Your vote is critical,” the union disingenuously claimed, “and we need you to come to hear the details and have your voice heard. In order for the agreement to take effect members will need to ratify the agreement.” There was no indication of what, if anything, would happen if workers voted down the contract; instead, the membership’s vote is presented as “critical” only insofar as they vote to ratify the contract.

Workers should reject this deal, as a matter of principle, by the widest possible margin, and not accept any deal unless they have been given a copy of the full contract and at least one week to study it. Moreover, they must demand the immediate resumption of the strike until all of their demands have been met.

“So, there’s no later meetings for it? I know a lot of people who won’t be able to make it,” one worker declared. “I already told my manager I’d be back, I can’t just tell her I changed my mind [and] I’m not coming back until Tuesday. That’s kind of messed up when we were supposed to call our store managers to get back on the schedule, so I did.”

One worker who spoke to the WSWS said, “We’re waiting for details to come out about the new contract, then we’ll be able to vote on it. We’re all a bit suspicious.”

Another said, “This does not sound right. we have not voted. If we stop striking before we vote we lose traction with our loyal customers. I really think this is going to confuse the public thinking it’s OK to shop at [King Soopers] again, before we even have an official contract.”

The shutdown of the King Soopers strike is only the latest in a string of sellouts by the pro-corporate trade unions. Only one week ago, the Chicago Teachers union shut down a city-wide job action at public schools, using virtually identical methods. The CTU worked out a deal behind the backs of teachers to send them back into schools, only to force them

to vote on the deal after the fact and schools had already been reopened. To cover his tracks, CTU President Jesse Sharkey claimed that teachers were powerless in the face of intransigence by the city's Democratic administration. This was proven to be a lie only days later by a growing wave of student and teacher sickouts across the country and around the world demanding the closure of schools.

While no details of the King Soopers deal have been made public, the circumstances behind the announcement can only indicate it is a sellout which accepts virtually all of management's main demands. Press reports only hours before the deal was announced suggested that negotiators were still far apart from a deal. King Soopers' president also reportedly behaved provocatively, spending only a few minutes at the bargaining table. Moreover, the company had just obtained a court injunction limiting pickets, a clear sign that it was not in the mood to negotiate but intended to smash the strike.

If King Soopers management is playing hardball, it is because of the strength of the strike, not its weakness. The grocery store chain has been unable to hire sufficient numbers of scabs and has been compelled to bring in managers from out of state in a bid to keep their stores operating. Moreover, the strike received enormous support from workers in surrounding communities, who refused to cross the picket line to shop, causing sales at the chain to collapse.

But the most important indication of the potential support for the strike came at the end of the week when the wave of student walkouts reached metropolitan Denver, when students at several schools participated in demonstrations to end in-person learning. The campaign to close schools is part of a growing international movement within the working class to oppose the subordination of public health policies to private profit and the reopening of schools in order to force parents back to work.

This groundswell of support and potential support came in spite of attempts by the UFCW to limit and isolate the strike. It called off the strike in Colorado Springs without explanation shortly before it was scheduled to begin, and also unilaterally extended a contract at Safeway stores which had been due to expire this month. Safeway workers in Denver report having to work 14 hours a day in order to keep up with increased demand from customers refusing to shop at King Soopers. One worker, criticizing this move, said on social media, "King [Soopers] went on strike leaving Safeway employees who are under the same union standing dealing with the madness. Their contracts are up as well and you don't hear nearly as much about them."

Particularly over the course of the last year, an unmistakable pattern has opened up, in which the trade

unions have responded to a growing wave of resistance by workers not by yielding to popular pressure but by acting more openly and treacherously to sabotage their struggles. This was the case at strikes last year at Volvo Trucks, John Deere and Kellogg's, as well as potential strikes which were called off at the last minute at Kaiser Permanente and in the film industry. The reason for this is because the unions long ago ceased to function as workers' organizations, and are pro-corporate bureaucracies controlling billions of dollars in assets which work hand in glove with management to enforce concessions.

As for the UFCW, it has played a critical role in keeping food processing plants open throughout the pandemic even during mass infection. Local 7's inaction in the summer of 2020 in the face of a major outbreak at the nearby JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado cost six workers their lives, until workers took eventually took matters into their own hands and staged wildcat walkouts to shut down the plant. At a pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, the UFCW responded to mass absenteeism during a major outbreak by working with management to create a perfect attendance bonus, even as the latter were privately taking bets on how many worker would become infected. It has also worked to sabotage one struggle after another at Kroger stores throughout the country, including Arkansas and Houston.

The way forward in this struggle is through workers taking matters into their own hands. Workers must move now to organize rank-and-file committees to oppose the shutdown of the strike, demand adequate time to study the contract and appeal for the broadest possible support from workers across the area and the country in their battle against not only management but the UFCW.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, which has helped workers across the world form such committees at factories, schools and other workplaces, stands ready to assist King Soopers workers. To contact us to begin building a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



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wsws.org/contact