

As UFCW rams through deal, more details of sellout contract at King Soopers made public

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25 January 2022

Late Monday night, the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7 declared the ratification of a new three-year deal at King Soopers in Denver, Colorado. The contract was abruptly announced Friday when the UFCW shut down a 10-day strike by more than 8,000 workers at the Colorado grocery store chain. No vote totals were publicly released by the union as of this writing.

In a statement published Sunday night urging the rejection of the deal, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the circumstances behind the announcement of the deal and the vote made it impossible that it was anything other than a massive betrayal which accepted all of the company's original demands. This has now been proven correct by the release of the full deal, which was apparently given to workers only once they arrived at ratification meetings Monday.

The deal contains everything which the union had claimed were red lines in negotiations, including wages only slightly above Denver's new minimum wage, as well as a letter of agreement which allows the company to unilaterally impose an even worse contract. There is not even a semblance of a fig leaf which the union could point to in order to justify its decision to shut down the strike.

The strike had powerful support from workers throughout the area who refused en masse to cross the picket lines by shopping at other stores. Moreover, the same day the strike was called off high school students throughout the Denver area carried out walkouts to demand the shutdown of schools, demonstrating the potential for King Soopers strikers to unite with workers and youth fighting against profit-driven pandemic policies.

Meanwhile, the company was digging in its heels. It had obtained an injunction against pickets outside of its stores only days prior, and hours before the deal was announced reports indicated that the two sides were still far apart.

Workers were made to vote on the deal in two sessions Monday in which they were not given adequate time to review the contract. Voting itself also took place more than 30 miles from downtown Denver at an airport hotel during working hours, providing impractical burdens for many workers to participate. The union's obvious goal was not to convince workers to support the deal but to break their momentum by calling off the strike, to depress voter turnout and present workers with a fait accompli.

Given those circumstances and the union's failure to even release vote totals Monday night, there is no reason to believe that the declared outcome of the vote is legitimate. It is entirely

possible that the contract was forced through not only with intimidation and voter suppression but also with outright fraud.

Predictably, Senator Bernie Sanders turned up in Denver on Monday night to run interference for the union bureaucracy, hailing the deal as a victory while remaining noticeably silent on the details. "We won, I'm telling you," UFCW Local 7 President Kim Cordova proclaimed defensively at the rally. The event was a reprisal of Sanders' role in the shutdown of the Kellogg's strike, where he held a rally with BCTGM union officials the same day that a leaked management email revealed that the union was conspiring with the company to ram through an unpopular deal almost identical to one which workers had already rejected.

In the leadup to Monday's vote, suspicion and frustration mounted among many workers on social media. One declared on Facebook, "we were given updates almost daily comparing what the company was offering versus what the union was asking. Why is it now that they have FINALLY agreed on something we have to wait for 4 days for details???"

Another said on Friday evening, "Sorry, but it's been several hours since this was posted and there's been nothing else but crickets since. I'd like to see the full contract proposal before Monday. Why am I hearing that workers cannot see the new proposal until they go vote on Monday? I'd like adequate time to look it over thoroughly before I vote on it."

Others have already come to their own conclusions. "This seems very shady that no one will talk to us and tell us what we are supposed to agree on so we can talk to our families about it. For all I know we are getting screwed and just being told it's a great offer."

Another worker said, "Hush, hush and rush, rush doesn't seem the way to go, does it. That, plus the limited voting window and inaccessible location almost makes it seem voter suppression is the goal. Why?"

What is in the new deal?

Photos of the full agreement leaked online Monday afternoon during the vote. A review of the full details makes clear that workers not only received none of their demands, but new concessions are being imposed, exposing as a lie claims to the

contrary in the bogus “highlights” sheet presented by Local 7 to the membership:

No end to two-tier wages, pay for new hires at barely above minimum wage (pages 37-40). The UFCW claimed during the strike that it was demanding a \$6 across-the-board wage increase. The new contract, however, has a starting pay increase only 30 cents above the company’s last offer before the strike. Most positions will start at only \$16 per hour. In Denver, the starting pay rate will be \$16.27, only 40 cents above the new city minimum wage which took effect on January 1. The two-tier wage structure first implemented in 2005 remains in place. By the end of the contract in 2024, starting pay will increase to only \$17 per hour. This is far below the 7 percent current inflation rate, which, if it remains consistent, would mean that \$17 in 2024 would be worth only about \$14.80 today. In other words, the contract will actually see workers lose money, in real terms, over the course of the deal.

Sharp increases in health care premiums (page 17). Weekly premiums are being sharply raised starting in 2023 under the new deal, from \$7.50 to \$8.50 a week for individual coverage, and from \$17 to \$26 per week for family coverage. This means that, in the final two years of the contract, workers will have to pay an additional \$936 in co-premiums for family coverage.

A ban on workers taking sick leave to avoid catching COVID-19 and toothless new “pandemic safety measures” (pages 13, 21). Entirely new language covering sick leave has been added specifically to keep workers from using sick leave “out of fear or anxiety of contracting a communicable illness that is a cause of a public health emergency,” i.e., COVID-19. Even those with pre-existing health conditions will not be allowed time off but instead will be given “accommodations” to “allow the employee to perform alternative work or jobs.”

Elsewhere, in a paragraph entitled “Pandemic Safety Measures,” the contract commits the company to “follow applicable CDC, NIOSH or OSHA guidelines and any state and federal mandates concerning the pandemic or epidemic.” In other words, the company has to do nothing beyond those measures which are already required by law, and even those are being continually reduced or undermined by the government itself. The only concrete measure which the company is required by the contract to follow is to give workers “access” to hand sanitizer, a meaningless gesture given that COVID-19 spreads through the air, not by touch.

In the event of an outbreak of the virus at a King Soopers location, the company and the union are required only to “meet and bargaining … concerning the effects thereof within fourteen (14) days following a written request by the union.” So if there is an outbreak, the union and management will meet and talk about it for two weeks while COVID-19 continues to rip through the workforce.

A Letter of Agreement allows the company to unilaterally impose an even more unfavorable contract (page 27). The new deal contains a side letter which reads: “Should the union at any time after the date of this Agreement … enter into a renewal agreement, covering any Safeway or Albertsons stores within the geographic area covered by this Agreement based upon a

settlement of new terms, excluding wages … which are more advantageous to such grocery stores, the Employer party to this agreement shall be privileged to adopt such settlement in its entirety.”

This means that if the UFCW later signs a contract which is even *worse* at rival grocery stores at Safeway or Albertsons, King Soopers may elect to unilaterally rip up this contract and impose a worse deal on its workforce. Significantly, this was a management demand which Kim Cordova had claimed earlier was a “non-starter” for the union.

This Letter of Agreement is all the more significant given that the UFCW had deliberately isolated King Soopers workers and Safeway workers by extending the contract for the latter, which had originally been due to expire this month. Workers at Safeway were forced to work 14 hours a day during the King Soopers strike to cope with increased demand from shoppers refusing to cross the picket lines. Having divided the workers at the two chains, it is now entirely possible that the UFCW and King Soopers management now intend to put the terms of this Letter of Agreement into effect.

What’s next?

The announcement of the contract ratification provoked angry comments from workers on Facebook, which UFCW Local 7 unsuccessfully attempted to muzzle by turning off commenting on its announcement of the deal’s passage.

Meanwhile, voting has yet to be conducted among King Soopers workers at Colorado Springs, the state’s second largest city, where the UFCW had abruptly canceled the strike before it began without warning. Having learned now the contents of the deal and the treachery of the unions, workers there should turn out by the largest margins to reject the deal. However, even in this case, the UFCW will attempt to isolate them and keep their coworkers in Denver on the job.

Workers must draw the lessons from this experience in order to prepare themselves for future struggles. Workers must form rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the workers in order to oppose union sabotage, formulate and fight for their demands, and appeal for the broadest possible support and collaboration with workers at Safeway, Albertsons and in other industries.



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