

UFCW cancels strike vote, extends negotiations with Smith's grocery chain in New Mexico

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The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union extended negotiations with the Smith's Food and Drug supermarket chain in New Mexico last Thursday, averting a strike vote which had been scheduled to take place among 2,800 workers. Smith's parent company is Kroger, the largest grocery company in America behind Walmart.

Among workers, the prospect of strike action was highly popular. In particular, workers pointed to low pay, and especially the rescinding of a \$2 per hour "hero bonus" in May of 2020.

In justifying the decision, Smith's corporate affairs manager Aubriana Martindale told reporters, "Our associates [corporate doubletalk for 'workers'] are the bloodline of our company, but we also have to balance those desires with making groceries affordable to our New Mexico community." Wages for Smith's workers average about \$14.05 an hour, not that far above the state's \$11.50 minimum wage, and steadily deteriorating from inflation.

Workers also have experienced stress from a variety of sources. There is overwork and understaffing due to sickness and resignations related to COVID-19. Others are leaving Smith's for other employers offering better wages, and management does not replace them, increasing the workload on those who stay.

Workers are often caught in the middle of disputes over the mask mandate between customers who either demand, often abusively, that they enforce the mandate or refuse to comply if asked to. Customers also complain about shortages of goods and empty shelves. In many of these situations, management is not to be found.

On top of everything else, stores have seen an

increase in armed robberies. Smith's stores have automated safes that the workers want removed. As one worker told the *Albuquerque Journal*, "We're all trying our best. We are there to serve the public, but at the same time, we're not slaves either."

On January 25, the UFCW filed an unfair practices complaint against Smith's with the National Labor Relations Board. The suit accuses Smith's of violating workers' rights by having managers ask employees their opinion of the union's actions. The suit charges that Smith's is encouraging withdrawal from the union to avoid a strike. It also accuses the company of bargaining in bad faith, proposing during meetings this week to nullify any wage increases for workers.

The cancellation of the strike vote comes only a week after the UFCW shut down a strike by over 8,000 workers at King Soopers, another Kroger-owned chain in the neighboring state of Colorado. The 10-day walkout had enjoyed enormous support among workers and residents, who refused to cross the picket lines to shop, but the UFCW abruptly shut down the strike and forced through a deal under dubious circumstances, which gave in to virtually all of management's original demands. Workers were not given any time to read the contract before voting, and suspicions of vote rigging abound among workers.

The deal even allows management to unilaterally impose an even worse contract if the UFCW bargains for a worse deal at rival chains Safeway and Albertsons. Safeway workers' contract had originally been due to expire last month, but the UFCW extended their contract, effectively isolating King Soopers workers and forcing Safeway workers to deal with increased demand in their stores from shoppers

refusing to cross the picket lines.

Workers cannot place their trust in the UFCW, which controls more than \$1 billion in assets and functions as a cheap labor contractor for the grocery stores and food production companies. Workers need their own organizations, democratically run rank-and-file committees independent of both management and their union accomplices, in order to take their struggle forward.



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