

Lessons of the King Soopers grocery workers strike

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The strike last month by 8,000 King Soopers grocery store workers in Colorado is a significant strategic experience for the working class. Once again, a powerful strike movement was isolated and betrayed by the pro-corporate unions, demonstrating the need for new organizations.

The workers at King Soopers, which is owned by the nation's largest grocery chain Kroger, voted nearly unanimously to strike against poverty wages and a two-tier wage structure which leaves them too poor to afford even the food which they sell. The strike engendered enormous support from the working class in the Denver area, who refused to cross the picket lines to shop or to hire on as strikebreakers, driving sales down at the chain as much as 90 percent. Workers understood that King Soopers workers were fighting against conditions which are being enforced all over the country and even the world.

But the United Food and Commercial Workers union betrayed the strike at precisely the point when it was at its strongest and enforced a sellout deal. From the beginning, UFCW Local 7 sought to isolate the strike, first by extending the contract for thousands of Safeway workers whose contract expired at nearly the same time, and then by canceling the strike for King Soopers workers in Colorado Springs, the state's second-largest city, without explanation. Ironically, Safeway workers were forced by management in their stores to pull 14-hour shifts in order to keep up with surging demand from King Soopers shoppers refusing to cross the picket line.

On Friday, January 21, the UFCW abruptly shut down the strike after 10 days and announced a tentative agreement had been reached. Without giving workers copies of the contract, much less time to study it, the union then forced workers to vote on the deal on Monday, January 24, in a ratification meeting held in a hard-to-reach location more than a half-hour outside of downtown Denver.

The union tried to ram it through as quickly as possible because the deal accepted virtually every one of management's demands, without even a fig leaf to workers. The new contract contains starting wages only slightly above

the new minimum wage in the city of Denver, increases in health care co-premiums and maintains the two-tier wage structure.

Worst of all, the contract contains a "favored nation" clause, which the union had dishonestly presented as a "red line" during negotiations. This clause means that, in the event that the UFCW negotiates a contract that is even *worse* at Albertson's or Safeway, then management has the right to unilaterally impose the terms of that contract at King Soopers. It is possible that this clause may be invoked in the near future, given the announcement of a new tentative agreement at Safeway last week.

The deal provoked significant anger among workers. But the aim of the UFCW was not to convince them to support the deal, but, having already shut down the picket lines, to present them with a fait accompli and convince them that it was useless to resist. In the end, the UFCW claims the deal was passed but did not even give a breakdown of the vote, raising suspicions among many workers that the deal was "ratified" through massive vote fraud.

The emerging conflict between workers and the unions

The King Soopers strike is part of a growing movement of the working class against decades of declining wages and living standards, made worse by rising inflation and the continued spread of COVID-19. Last year, there were major strikes by Hunt's Point produce workers, Warrior Met coal miners, autoworkers at Volvo Trucks and John Deere, and food production workers at Kellogg's and Nabisco. Less than two full months into 2022, thousands of teachers and students have taken action around the country against the unsafe reopening of schools, and oil refinery workers and BNSF railroad workers are also pressing for strike action.

But in every one of these struggles, workers have run up not only against the intransigence of management but of the

trade unions, which have done everything they could to betray workers. Even as the UFCW was betraying the King Soopers strike last month, the Chicago Teachers Union was enforcing a return to work after job actions by city teachers. This month, the railroad and oil refinery unions are working to block strike action and keep workers on the job, in the case of BNSF, even enforcing a no-strike injunction passed down by a right-wing judge.

In many cases, these struggles have taken the form of rebellions by workers against the union bureaucracy. At Volvo Trucks, John Deere and elsewhere, workers took matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees to challenge the unions' sellouts.

Over the past year the UFCW has canceled strike after strike, including among Kroger workers in West Virginia, Arkansas and Texas. That they called a strike at all at King Soopers was a testament to the massive level of opposition among workers, and the fear by the UFCW that they could totally lose control of the situation. Nevertheless, having been forced to call a strike, they sought to limit it in advance to three weeks and isolate it as much as possible.

But the massive levels of support for the strike meant that their attempts to isolate strikers and sow an atmosphere of discouragement failed. The breaking point for the union came when walkouts took place in Denver high schools, raising the potential of a broader movement uniting the fight by grocery workers for decent wages and working conditions with the fight against the unsafe reopening of schools on behalf of corporate America. Determined to prevent this from taking place, the UFCW fled into the arms of management and accepted all of their demands in order to end the strike.

Grocery stores are only one of countless industries where workers once made a decent standard of living, but where management, with the assistance of the unions, have driven down wages and converted workers into little better than highly exploited industrial slaves. Based on a strategy of class compromise and "America First" nationalism, the unions have been totally unable to respond to the determination of the capitalist ruling class to bolster their profits by driving living standards for workers back more than a century. Instead, they have responded by openly integrating themselves into the structure of management, securing the financial interests of the union bureaucracy at workers' expense.

Now, the Biden administration is seeking to develop this incestuous corporatist relationship to the next level, seeking to enlist unions in a bid to enforce a sort of state guardianship over workers in order to guarantee the continued flow of American supply chains.

The UFCW is one of the most extreme examples of this

process. Despite its membership comprising grocery, retail and food processing workers, among the poorest sections of the American working class, the union controls more than \$1 billion in assets, according to Department of Labor filings. Local 7 President Kim Cordova alone makes more than \$200,000 per year, roughly six times the grocery store workers she falsely claims to represent.

The trade unions are no longer "unions" in any real sense—they function deliberately not to unite workers but to divide them. If the unions, in spite of decades of betrayals, remained in some sense workers organizations, they would be responding to the biggest movement of the working class in 40 years by organizing a struggle, or at least yielding to mass pressure from below. But the opposite is the case. The more workers enter into the arena, the more openly and brazenly the unions move against them.

The way forward

The outcome of the strike was not preordained, and workers were in a powerful position. But a victory was impossible as long as control of the strike remained in the hands of false "leaders" in the pockets of management. This shows that workers need a new strategy and new organizations. These organizations are called rank-and-file committees, and they are already being built by workers around the world.

In contrast to the unions, rank-and-file committees are genuinely democratic, responsive organizations, controlled not by unaccountable bureaucrats but by workers themselves. Rank-and-file committees don't accept the so-called "right" of corporations to profits and don't bargain away workers' most pressing interests behind closed doors. Instead, committees begin with what workers need, and appeal for unity and support from workers all over the country and the world.

To prepare for future struggles, rank-and-file committees must be built at King Soopers and at the other major grocery store chains. The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist workers in building them. For more information, fill out the contact form below.



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