

Retail workers at Kroger affiliated chains describe conditions fraught with danger and abuse

Our reporter
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A former Fred Meyer worker in Washington state spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about conditions at the grocery chain, now owned by food giant Kroger. The worker, whose name is being withheld to prevent possible retaliation, described what life is like for grocery workers amid the continuing pandemic.

The worker, characterized the COVID-19 safety in her store as “not good at all.” Adding, “[W]e were to acquire our own masks. They had hand sanitizer that smelled like they made it in the toilet. It smelled so gross. It was disgusting, so I always brought my own. No, they didn’t take very big safety measures at all. At all.”

Overall lack of safety protocols came to a head when the worker was closely exposed to an infected coworker. When the worker attempted to confront management over the incident, “... [T]hey got so pissed at me, and they were like, ‘We don’t have to tell everybody.’”

The worker knows the potential deadly result of the company’s silence during potential exposure. “So, here I am picking up my kid, kissing her on the cheek, hugging my mom,” she said. “I could have gotten her so sick.”

Quicklist, the lone holdout in many stores from the pandemic’s early days, is a source of pain and sometimes humiliation for the workers who must fulfill orders under the lash of their barking managers. The worker described constant harassment. “We were yelled at all the time; ‘Hurry up, shoppers. Hurry, hurry!’”

“Fall too far behind, they write your name on the board. You don’t get any, ‘Hey, congratulations for helping a customer.’ They’re like, ‘Why are you so

slow today? Your pick time was horrible.’... It was like working in a prison yard.”

The worker reported that management abuse has been particularly harsh when directed against older employees.

“I remember there was an 80-year-old lady,” she said. “[T]hey were being so mean to her. They wrote her name on a whiteboard because she had the slowest pick times. ‘Wow, does that make you feel good? She’s 80!’”

This type of elder abuse is not unique to one store. At one Smith’s Food store in Wyoming, another Kroger affiliate, an elderly employee was charged with completing a task beyond her physical abilities, said one current Smith’s employee. As a result the worker was injured. “They had her drive herself to the ER. And she had to work the next day. And they didn’t even check on her to see if she was okay. [T]hat’s just another form of them just being like, ‘Oh, you’re fine to come into work the next day. And if you can’t, you’re replaceable.’”

The Fred Meyer and Smith’s Food stores have more in common than elder abuse. Namely, managers at both stores are verbally and emotionally abusive to their autistic employees.

The Fred Meyer worker said, “He’s a kid with autism, and they would just yell at him. Then I’m like, ‘Oh, my God.’... I’m like, ‘Dude, he’s got autism. Stop it.’... I remember one guy, he called him the wrong name. He called him something – Allen. He goes, ‘That’s not my name. Don’t call me that, or I’ll punch you in the f...ing face!’... There was some hostile s...”

Similarly appalling treatment of an autistic worker

has been witnessed by the Smith's Foods worker, who lamented the "really bad bullying issues."

The worker explained, "There are workers that are very mean to one of the baggers. Some of the managers are even mean to this person. ... They just completely put him down ... and just make fun of him straight to his face. The manager sees this happening."

Though physical and psychological abuse are common in Kroger stores, managers at the Batavia, Ohio Kroger took matters to a whole new level. Deli Manager Evan Seyfried, according to a lawsuit filed by his father in 2021, was subject to systemic and prolonged psychological torture that included sabotage of his work performance, sexual advances made to him by his manager, co-defendant in the lawsuit Shannon Frazee, and even threatening texts, including child pornography. After months of such abuse, Seyfried, a 20-year veteran of Kroger's, took his own life on March 9, 2021. Seyfried found himself in Frayzee's crosshairs, says the suit, because he insisted on wearing a protective COVID-19 mask during his shift.

Though workers at many Kroger locations do have the right to file grievances with their union, they know that any grievance they file will simply disappear. The United Food and Commercial Workers, the union charged with "representing" a large portion of Kroger workers, has betrayed their members by ignoring grievances and preventing or squelching strikes, while never failing to collect dues.

A January strike by King Soopers workers in Colorado and Smith's workers in New Mexico was betrayed by the UFCW. The strike, involving 8,000 workers was at its peak, was called off by the UFCW, forcing the workers to vote on a contract they had little time to evaluate. The new contract was tailored to suit the needs of management and imposed some major worker concessions.

Between November 2020 and April 2021, Houston-area Kroger workers were kept in a perpetual holding pattern by the UFCW. The 14,000 workers were pressing for wage improvement. Despite overwhelming sentiment for strike, the union refused to act. For roughly five months, Houston Kroger workers worked without a contract while the UFCW went through the motions of negotiations.

Arkansas Kroger workers, too, were forced to work without a contract between 2020 and 2021. All the

while, the UFCW continued contract talks without setting a strike deadline.

Similar stalling tactics were used against 10,000 grocery workers in the Portland, Oregon, area in 2019. Workers for Fred Meyer and QFC, both Kroger owned, and Albertsons and Safeway, both owned by Albertsons Companies, Inc. worked without a contract for more than a year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated abusive working conditions facing retail workers that existed before the emergence of the virus. These experiences draw a line under the need to have truly representative workplace organizations, independent of the pro-company unions like the UFCW. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages retail workers to organize independent rank-and-file committees to fight for decent pay and safe working conditions. For help forming a rank-and-file committee or to report conditions where you work, contact the WSWs.



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