

Grocery store workers in Southern California to vote on possible strike

Linda Rios, Kevin Martinez
21 March 2022

Grocery store workers in Southern California will cast ballots from March 21 through March 23 to decide whether they will go on strike. The contract for 60,000 employees covering over 500 grocery stores, including Southern California grocery giants Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons, Pavilion Stores, as well as Gelson's and Stater Bros., expired on March 6 without a new contract agreement being reached by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 770.

The UFCW bargaining unit in Southern California met with Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions in January to negotiate a new contract for employees. However, an agreement was not reached, the union says, because the paltry 60 cent increase proposed by the companies was not adequate.

With inflation higher today than at any point over the past 40 years, grocery workers are struggling to make ends meet. Having been identified as essential, workers have had to work throughout a raging pandemic while their living standards have been ravaged by inflation.

The majority of workers in the grocery industry, a whopping 77 percent, are hired on a part-time basis, although many of them work 35-40 hours a week. Despite some increases in pay, most workers are finding it difficult to pay rent and keep food on the table. The findings from a survey by the Economic Roundtable in January found that while working for a large conglomerate of grocery chains, more than three quarters of workers at Kroger are food insecure and that 14 percent were homeless last year. Many workers will go hungry to keep their children and even their pets fed, or consume cheap, heavily processed foods in order to survive.

The pandemic has also had a major impact on grocery workers. In addition to being concerned for their own health and wellbeing, many were concerned about

becoming infected at work and bringing COVID-19 home to their families. One 34-year-old employee, a single parent, recently lost a battle with the highly infectious disease. Still other workers had to manage with constant staff shortages and enforcing mask mandates and regulations in the face of sometimes combative customers.

In 2003, grocery store workers at Ralphs, Vons and Albertsons in Southern California struck for 141 days with the job action continuing into 2004. The walkout cost the companies an estimated \$2 billion, while workers lost \$300 million in wages. In addition, workers were forced by the UFCW to accept reduced overtime pay, holiday pay and sick time, higher health care deductibles, and the loss of defined pension plans.

More recently, in 2019, the UFCW blocked strike action by more than 46,000 workers employed by the same food retail giants in Southern California despite an overwhelming 96 percent vote for strike approval.

The union also prevented Southern Californian workers from linking with grocery workers in the Pacific Northwest, organized by UFCW Local 555. The 25,000 grocery workers from Oregon and Southwest Washington state voted in favor of a strike in July of the same year, but were prevented from unifying their struggles with their Southern Californian comrades who were up against the same companies.

Albertsons made \$16.7 billion in 2021, an 11 percent increase compared to the \$15.4 billion it made in 2021. The CEO of Albertsons, Vivek Sankaran, made more than \$8.4 million in total compensation last year. Meanwhile, the largest grocery store conglomerate, Kroger, had an annual revenue of \$137.9 billion in 2021, up from \$122.3 billion in 2020. Kroger CEO W. Rodney McMullen's total compensation was more than \$20 million last year, while the average employee

salary at his company was \$16 per hour.

McMullen's salary jumped by \$6.4 million from the year before, a hike of more than 45 percent since the start of the pandemic. The pay for the average Kroger worker dropped 8.1 percent in 2020, as the company hired more workers to compensate for the increased workload. The company offered a temporary "hero pay" of an extra \$2 an hour during only the first weeks of the pandemic.

The store even closed stores and laid off workers in Seattle and California where local ordinances were enacted mandating bonus pay for essential workers during the pandemic.

The UFCW has said it is negotiating for higher wages as well as an increase in the number of hours for part-time workers and agreements that would prevent workers from being kept after their scheduled hours. The union has also vowed to not keep workers on the job for months without a contract, even though that is exactly what happened in 2019.

For its part during the pandemic, the UFCW has kept workers on the job and isolated them from the struggles of teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class who have been up against the same miserable conditions and even the same corporations. They have worked to isolate workers in one region from uniting with workers who are part of the same union and have the same interests at stake. A case in point, the workers at Stater Bros. stores were not included in the recent contract negotiations.

Workers in Colorado employed by King Soopers, a subsidiary of Kroger, were betrayed by the UFCW after voting on a contract with little time to review it. The strike, involving 8,000 workers, was called off at the behest of management.

Kroger workers in Houston were poised to strike between November 2020 and April 2021 to press for better wages. But the UFCW kept the 14,000 workers on the job for some five months while they strung out negotiations. Arkansas Kroger workers also worked with no contract between 2020 and 2021, while the UFCW stalled for time in contract talks while never setting a deadline for a strike.

Such tactics are examples of an organization that does not represent the interests of workers, but follows the dictates of management in the service of the capitalist system. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on workers

to vote for a strike and intervene to prevent the sellout of their struggle by the UFCW bureaucracy by forming their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the UFCW. These committees, democratically controlled by workers, will democratically decide on demands, including decent pay raises above the rate of inflation and safe working conditions, including COVID protections. To find out more about building rank-and-file committees and to report working conditions at your job, contact the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact