

Southern California grocery workers vote to authorize strike

Our reporters
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Grocery store workers in Southern California voted to authorize a strike for 47,000 employees at more than 500 Southern California grocery stores, including the Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavillion chains, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) announced over the weekend.

The vote to authorize a strike does not mean one will happen. It only authorizes the UFCW to call a strike if no “progress” is made in contract negotiations. As has often been the case, the union can still announce that a deal with the companies has been made at the last possible minute to avert a strike. Contract negotiations are set to resume as scheduled on Wednesday.

The fact that the UFCW did not release the results of the strike authorization vote for several days was a sign that the union bureaucracy feared that it would be forced to call a strike. Undoubtedly, preparations are being made behind the backs of the rank and file to put together a sellout agreement.

Union officials said that talks with the supermarket chains had stalled earlier this month, after a three-year-old labor agreement expired March 7. Despite having no contract in place, workers have been forced to stay on the job under the terms of the last contract.

Grocery store workers, who have been forced to work throughout the pandemic with increased workloads, unsafe working conditions and understaffing, are voting on a strike, the first since 2003-04, after management made a final offer during negotiations for only an additional 60 cents per hour.

The UFCW said it is negotiating for a \$5 an hour wage increase, more hours for part-time employees and codified agreements that would prevent workers from having to stay on the job after the end of their shifts. The union has also said the companies are spying on protesting workers and refusing to implement wage

hikes agreed to in the last contract.

The last strike in 2003-04 lasted 141 days and cost the grocery store companies \$2 billion, while workers lost \$300 million in wages. During the last contract, negotiations broke down in 2019. Grocery workers then voted to authorize a strike but were forced to work for two months until a sellout deal was reached, and then the strike was called off.

Workers should take a warning from the betrayal by the UFCW of the strike by 8,000 King Sooper workers in Colorado. The union abruptly called off the strike just as it was beginning to have an impact, forcing a rushed vote without even providing workers the full text of the agreement. The deal accepted virtually all of management’s demands without even minimal gains for the workers.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers at several grocery stores in Southern California to get their opinions on the most important issues in the contract struggle.

A Ralphs worker, who asked to remain anonymous, said that she supported a strike and that although Ralphs was her second, part-time job, she would stand in solidarity with her fellow workers. She noted that the company’s offer of 60 cents more an hour was “not fair” adding, “We should all be on strike.”

Conditions during the pandemic were challenging, according to the worker, especially with customers who were refusing to wear masks. For a time, the company was giving employees \$100 in groceries, but she said, “That’s nothing.”

One manager told the WSWs about the conditions during the pandemic, saying, “The hazard pay we got is basically nothing.” He noted that despite being a union member for 14 years, he did not have faith that any improvement would be achieved even if a strike were

called, saying, “It’s always been like that, 10 to 20 cent hourly raises and that’s it.”

Another worker said, “Nobody wants to have a strike, strikes are painful, but I’ll stand by what my coworkers decide. We shouldn’t have to fight for more than a 60-cent raise.”

Barbara, an experienced worker, recalled, “A cashier used to be one of the best jobs in the country, back when I started 35 years ago, but things have really declined.” She added, “I swear that I must have had COVID over 30 times; we have all had it multiple times. We were just expected to get sick.”

Relating to the war in Ukraine, she said, “I don’t even know what they’re doing over there. They’re spending billions of dollars when our veterans are here homeless on the streets. It’s terrible.”

John, a newer worker, told the WSWS, “I’m a bagger, and they will have me do the cashier’s job and only pay me 10 cents more an hour. There is no incentive. They call it a combo position.

“I could be making \$19 an hour at In-N-Out Burger or another place, but I stay here because I like the people.”

Both workers agreed that the unions were working with management to advance their own interests, pointing out that some workers were making \$19 an hour at some fast food chains and were not even part of a union. They noted that the unions had not negotiated for wages to even keep up with the basic cost of living.

The two said they would vote for a strike after their work shifts. When they were warned by WSWS reporters that the US escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war would be used as a bludgeon against their strike, they readily agreed.

Workers should prepare for strike action, but to win their demands that fight needs to be taken out of the hands of the UFCW bureaucracy, which has shown again and again that it sides with management. Grocery workers must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and the Democrats and Republicans. These committees will democratically decide on the workers’ own demands and turn out to broaden their struggle to other sections of workers, including Amazon workers, teachers and transport workers. To find out more about how to build a rank-and-file committee and to speak out on working conditions at your job, please contact the WSWS.



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