

# Texas, Louisiana Kroger grocery workers press for strike action

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*Work at Kroger? Contact the WSWS to tell us about the conditions you face and to discuss organizing a rank-and-file committee. Workers' identities will be kept confidential.*

In Texas and Louisiana, thousands of workers for the Kroger Company, the largest US grocery chain, are pressing for strike action, seeking to win major improvements in wages and health care benefits.

On March 30, workers at Kroger stores in Lake Charles, Sulphur and Alexandria, Louisiana, voted to reject a “last, best and final offer” proposed by the company last September, at the same time voting to authorize a strike.

On March 31, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 455 stated that it would be holding a “strike planning” meeting for Houston, Texas-area Kroger workers on April 7. Houston Kroger workers had voted to reject a “last, best and final” offer and authorize a strike almost unanimously in November 2021.

The Kroger workers, determined to raise their living standards, are part of a growing upsurge of working class struggles across the US and internationally, with tens of thousands of grocery store workers in Southern California also voting for strike action at Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions late last month.

Despite the strike authorization vote in Louisiana, however, UFCW Local 455 stated on its Facebook page that workers there would not yet be called to collect picket signs along with workers in Texas, signaling that the union is seeking to isolate and contain any potential strike. As of this writing, Local 455 has not replied to questions from the WSWS as to whether it plans to call a strike at all stores in Texas and Louisiana where it has members, or only some of them.

Workers have grown increasingly angry over the UFCW's delay tactics. In the course of two years of contract negotiations, Local 455 has repeatedly stalled on calling a walkout for its roughly 15,000 members at Kroger in the region. The last contract expired in April 2020, and workers at the Houston-area Kroger have voted to authorize a strike at least two times since then, the first time in November 2020, and the second in November 2021.

Responding to the announcement of the strike planning meeting, a worker commented on Local 455's page, “If the time is now, why another week? What is up with the procrastination? Kroger doesn't believe we will strike so why are we being forced to sit on our hands?” Another wrote, “Is there ever going to be a walkout or strike...”

Local 455 has stated that the walkout would be conducted as an “unfair labor practices” strike, in a move aimed at excluding economic issues from the struggle, and instead centering it on the union's objections to the company's hard-nosed tactics.

According to the UFCW, the company and the union reached a tentative agreement in December, which the company then subsequently refused to sign. Kroger has denied that it reached an agreement, while at the same time moving to unilaterally impose parts of its “last, best and final offer.”

In a statement responding to the strike authorization vote by Louisiana workers, the company declared, “It's business as usual at Kroger. A strike authorization doesn't mean a strike. Our Last, Best and Final Offers, which we presented last September to our Lake Charles, Sulphur, and Alexandria associates, are good offers. They provide wage increases and stable, reliable, and affordable health care. We believe the most productive thing the union can do is to work with the company in a manner that positively addresses their concerns. Our focus remains on our associates and getting an agreement at the bargaining table.”

In reality, the contract terms imposed by the company keeps Louisiana workers at poverty-level wages, with starting pay for clerks just above \$11 and with significant increases to out-of-pocket health care costs. UFCW Local 455 has stated that the offer also cuts full-time positions, limits overtime—which many workers are forced to use to shore up their income—and reduces vacation pay for part-timers.

The standard of living in the region is dismal. The per capita income in Lake Charles, which has yet to recover from the aftermath of Hurricane Laura in 2020, is \$30,683, according to the US Census Bureau report, and 20 percent of the population is below the federal poverty line. Average pay for a Kroger worker nationally is between \$12.22 to \$12.58 an hour, according to Indeed.com.

While Kroger workers have been cynically dubbed “heroes” and “essential” by company PR reps throughout the pandemic, they are now being told there is no money to meet their essential needs, even while Kroger has seen its profits surge. The company took in \$137.9 billion in revenue and \$3.5 billion in operating profit in 2021, up from \$132.5 billion and \$2.8 billion in 2020, while cutting off hazard pay for workers just a few months into the pandemic. Kroger CEO Rodney McMullen received compensation of around \$22 million in 2020, around 900 times what the average Kroger worker earns.

Instead of seeking to mobilize grocery store workers throughout the region, let alone nationally, in a common struggle against Kroger's attacks, the UFCW has instead sought to channel opposition behind impotent complaints filed with the National Labor Relations Board. Of particular concern to the UFCW bureaucracy is Kroger's move to cut off the automatic deduction of dues from workers' paychecks, threatening the six-figure incomes of UFCW executives.

With the cost of gasoline and food surging, there is widespread sentiment among grocery store workers for a common fight, as well as pent-up anger over being subjected to hazardous working conditions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in every case the UFCW and its counterparts are seeking to isolate struggles from each other, block strikes and impose the grocery giants' terms.

In Tennessee, the UFCW is also negotiating a contract for roughly 9,000 workers at Kroger but has made no effort to mobilize the workers there in unison with those in Texas and Louisiana.

Meanwhile, in Little Rock, Arkansas, the UFCW reached a deal with Kroger and announced passage of a contract on March 22. The retrogressive character of that agreement provoked opposition from workers, with one commenting on UFCW Local 2008's Facebook page, "They had us wait nearly 2 years to better negotiate ... nothing? This leadership is a complete joke. Compromised in some form or another."

And in January, the UFCW extended contract negotiations with Kroger subsidiary Smith's Food and Drug supermarket in New Mexico, canceling a strike vote it had scheduled for 2,800 workers.

At grocery stores, meatpacking houses, and other food production and distribution facilities, the UFCW has overseen abominable conditions during the pandemic. In Milford, Ohio, a lawsuit filed on July 12, 2021—*Kenneth Seyfried v. The Kroger Company*—alleged that Kroger manager Shannon Frazee harassed 19-year veteran Kroger employee Evan Seyfried for wearing a mask as COVID-19 ripped through the US. The bullying, despite Seyfried's multiple reports of the hostilities, sabotage, spying and sexual harassment to his union steward, went unresolved, resulting in Seyfried's suicide, the suit states. The UFCW's complicity in this crime is exposed in the fact that neither an investigation nor a formal statement on their website was called or issued.

In the meatpacking industry, approximately 59,000 workers had been infected with COVID-19 and 269 had died from the virus as of October 2021, according to a congressional report that month, more than double the previous figures reported by the UFCW. Notoriously, managers at a Tyson pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, bet on how many workers would become infected with COVID-19. The UFCW essentially turned a blind eye, with the collusion between the union and the company so great that a local sheriff felt compelled to comment, "The first thought I had was, 'Shame on Tyson corporate.' But that was very closely followed by, 'Doesn't Tyson have a union that should be protecting these people? And if they don't, why don't they? And if they do, where the hell are they?'"

Workers' demands for better wages and better living conditions are occurring amid an international crisis of mounting inflation,

rising food and energy prices, and the very real possibility of a third, possibly nuclear world war.

Kroger workers must carefully consider what is at stake. The decision to strike could not be more timely, more justified and necessary than now. Three weeks ago, approximately 500 Chevron oil refinery workers in Richmond, California, initiated a strike against a sellout four-year contract agreed to by the United Steelworkers (USW). While gas prices have surged, with companies such as Chevron, ExxonMobil and Marathon profiteering and reaping record profits, workers at these companies can barely afford to fill up their own gas tanks.

As fuel prices rise, the struggle of oil and gas workers is inextricably linked to the demands raised by not only Kroger workers, but Amazon workers, school teachers, miners and many more sections of the working class. But workers' demands for higher wages to combat the high cost of living cannot and will not be met by the unions.

Kroger workers, and workers of all industries, must draw from the lessons of the betrayed strike at King Soopers, a subsidiary of Kroger. In January, more than 8,000 King Soopers workers walked out in Colorado over low wages and brutal working conditions. On January 21, 2022, UFCW Local 7 abruptly ended the strike, announcing it had reached a tentative agreement with the company but refused to present the contract to the workers. The sellout deal maintained poverty wages and a two-tier wage structure. From the beginning the UFCW isolated the strike, first by extending a contract for thousands of Safeway workers, then canceling a strike without explanation.

The class struggle is erupting internationally, with mass protests in Sri Lanka over the weekend, fueled by skyrocketing prices, defying government-imposed curfews and police repression, and demanding the resignation of right-wing President Gotabaya Rajapakse.

The working class is increasingly coming into direct conflict with both the pro-corporate trade unions and the capitalist state in its struggle for higher wages and decent working conditions. The way forward to unify these struggles is through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracy and the big business political parties. Such committees would provide a means to circumvent the information blackout imposed by the companies and the unions and coordinate struggles for workers' interests on a far wider scale, across different states, industries and even countries.

*The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party stand ready to assist workers in forming new organizations of struggle. To discuss organizing a rank-and-file committee at your workplace, fill out the form below:*



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