

“If we went on strike we would have had a huge impact around the world, and that’s why they came to an agreement”

Southern California grocery workers union announces sellout tentative agreement, averting strike action

Kevin Martinez
7 April 2022

Are you a grocery worker? 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.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) International Union Local 770 announced a tentative agreement Monday, averting a possible strike of more than 47,000 grocery store workers throughout Southern California. The new three-year contract follows by only a week and a half a 95 percent strike authorization vote by workers at grocery chains Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions.

Workers have not been given any details of the contract and, according to the union, will only get a list of “highlights” on the day they are supposed to vote, without any time to review the full document.

Throughout the two years of the pandemic, grocery store workers have been labeled “heroes” and “essential workers” while being denied the most basic protections against sickness and any real increase in pay or benefits. All the while, companies like Kroger have profited immensely from the increased demand and afforded its CEO, Rodney McMullen, \$22 million in 2020, while grocery store workers were infected and died or were harassed by customers refusing to wear masks or maintain social distancing.

Melissa, a bagger at a Ralphs in San Diego, told the WSWs: “We should not have gone this long without a raise. We deserved a raise and are essential workers. When the pandemic started people were getting sick

left and right. Ralphs is a big company, and they can easily afford to pay us. In San Diego, we have to bear with the rents and cost of living. There are so many places right now where you can start at \$18 dollars an hour, but here it’s \$15.”

Melissa made clear she did not trust the UFCW. “Everything about this whole process has been so confusing. First the union said we are going on strike and then they say we are not. They haven’t given us any information so there are a lot of rumors going around. The rumor right now is that it’s a dollar extra per year, which is not enough. I don’t believe in the union. They try to strike a pose but where is the real action, where is the movement? Obviously if we went on strike, we would have had a huge impact around the world, and that’s why they came to an agreement.”

The tentative agreement followed the shutdown of a strike by Sacramento educators less than 24 hours earlier. Meanwhile, the corporate news media presents the deal as a foregone conclusion before workers have even cast their votes.

Voting will take place from Monday April 11 through to Wednesday. Workers are furious that they are being kept in the dark and that rumors are spreading in place of any concrete details. This is a clear indication that the deal is a sellout that falls short of workers’ demands, which included a \$5-per-hour pay increase.

Workers also demanded guaranteed hours for part-time workers, better health benefits, increased store safety and a secure pension. The UFCW said in their

latest announcement that they will only release full details of the contract *after* the locals have ratified it.

The UFCW has deliberately sought to isolate the struggles of its members in different regions of the country, and within Kroger itself. The deal follows a sellout earlier this year of a strike by Denver-area grocery workers at King Soopers, a Kroger subsidiary. In Tennessee, 9,000 workers are negotiating a contract with Kroger at the same time that Kroger grocery workers in Texas and Louisiana were pressing for strike action.

The UFCW has also negotiated a tentative agreement with Stater Brothers workers throughout Southern California. Voting is expected to begin over the weekend. In a nearly identical fashion, workers have not been given the details of the contract.

The UFCW also recently announced a deal with Kroger in Little Rock, Arkansas and canceled a strike vote for 2,800 workers at Smith's Food and Drug supermarket in New Mexico, also a Kroger subsidiary, after another deal was reached.

The UFCW is determined to prevent a repeat of the 2003-2004 supermarket strike, the last time grocery store workers fought for better pay and benefits but failed to achieve their demands. In 2019, UFCW workers authorized a strike, but this was averted when the union announced a deal two months later.

"People should consider voting no," one worker said on social media. "I've been doing this for 33+ years. Every time there's a contract, they give us the highlights and a rah rah rah speech, yea you got a 50 cent raise. They don't tell us about the negatives. The devil is in the details."

The worker added, "They **SHOULD** send us a complete copy of the agreement and give us a chance to read it through. Instead, you get the highlights and vote the same day. No time to think it over..."

Workers must demand the full details of the tentative agreement as well as adequate time to study the contract before voting. Without this, workers should reject the contract on principle. To mobilize opposition against the UFCW's betrayal, workers should form rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy.

To find out more about forming a rank-and-file committee and the conditions at your workplace, contact the WSWs.



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