

As vote on UFCW sellout concludes

Southern California and Texas grocery workers outraged over being denied time to study full contract details before voting

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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.

More than 47,000 grocery store workers in Southern California have been voting since Monday on a new three-year contract, which was agreed to by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). The rotten deal came despite a vote by 95 percent of workers at Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions to authorize a strike. UFCW International Union Local 770 announced last week that a strike was averted due to the contract agreement. Voting is set to conclude Wednesday, April 13.

Though the tentative agreement was announced last Monday, April 4, workers have been denied the right to view the details until entering the polls and are receiving a barrage of messaging from UFCW officials referring to it as a significant win. The deal encompasses UFCW locals 5Gs, 324, 770, 1167, 1428, and 1442 across 540 stores throughout Southern California.

The agreement amounts to a \$4.25 wage increase over the three years of the contract, with a \$2.00 increase in March 2022, a \$1.00 increase in March 2023 and \$1.25 from March 2024-2025. With many part-time employees making close to \$15 an hour, they will not see their pay reach \$20/hour even by the contract's expiration in March 2025 despite the fact that Los Angeles and Southern California in general are among the most expensive regions for cost of living in the country.

Despite being kept in the dark by the UFCW, workers are sharing images of the contract and discussing it on social media, with one laying out clearly that "If you're topped out it's a little over an 11% raise and inflation is at 8.5% so it is a raise. ... But over the next two years it will be a cut most likely. Side note, I just got my price changes for tomorrow in

my department and everything is going up a \$1+ which is a 12-15% price increase."

In addition to Southern California grocery workers, voting is taking place among Kroger workers in Texas represented by UFCW Local 55. Workers on social media are simultaneously calling for a "No" vote, noting that the contract will result in paycuts for "all part-timers at step 3 or 4." Having been given no details by the UFCW, workers have taken to Reddit to post copies of the contract and speak to one another, with one pointing out, "It's sad we gotta rely on someone to take 17 pictures and post to reddit to see the agreement in advance. That being said, you're amazing. Thank you for posting this."

Over the weekend *World Socialist Web Site* reporting teams spoke to workers in San Diego and Los Angeles about the agreement. Workers discussed the rising cost of living and the effects of inflation and skyrocketing gas prices, which are being further fueled by the US/NATO-led war with Russia in Ukraine.

Ramon, a young Albertsons worker, told reporters that wages and health care are major issues. "I've worked here for two years and have not even been offered any health care." He said that he works part-time and is making between \$15-16 an hour, forcing him to seek additional employment. "I would need at least \$21-22 to survive, and that would be just barely surviving."

Ramon like all the other workers we spoke to expressed frustration that the full contract had not been shared, noting, "We should be given the full details of the contract to study. We don't work for the union, but the union should be working for us."

Arcelia, a young worker who makes \$15 an hour, agreed that the UFCW, like the other corporatist trade unions, are working as accomplices of the grocery giants in trying to enforce a concessions contract. She noted her entire family

works or has worked at Albertsons and has witnessed over time the erosion of working conditions and wages. “It used to be a good job to work here; my parents worked at Albertsons my whole life. But at \$15 an hour I am actually making what they made 30 years ago.” Arcelia called for a strong “No” vote and the fight for higher wages in order to survive living in Southern California.

Grocery workers across the country who have been sold out by the UFCW in recent months are raising warnings for Southern California grocery workers and calling for a “No” vote. In addition to higher wages, workers have been demanding guaranteed hours for part-time workers, better health benefits, increased store safety and a secure pension.

Michael, a part-time E-commerce worker at Fred Meyers (Kroger) in Oregon where the UFCW pushed through a contract this past December 2021, said he and his coworkers were “sold a lemon,” with the contract accompanied by major cuts to employee hours.

“Apparently, it’s the slow time of year, which is what we keep getting told. I was told that by my manager because I have two unavailable days per week due to medical visits that instead of part-time 20, I must now be part-time 12 and they must enforce those hours.”

Michael said his pay went from \$12.10 to \$14.75 with the new contract, but that was because there was no guarantee of hours. Everyone has been reduced. “It’s really destructive to morale. ... With the reduced hours I am definitely making less now than before the contract. I was bringing home \$250- \$300 a week, and with these reduced hours I’ll be lucky if I bring home \$150 this week.”

Thirteen thousand workers across 170 Stater Bros. Market locations in Southern California also voted over the weekend for a UFCW-endorsed contract. They were similarly kept in the dark about details of the contract and were only provided a list of “highlights” by the union before being asked to vote without any time to review the full contract.

One worker told the WSWS that management informed her Saturday night that the contract passed “overwhelmingly,” but concrete vote totals have not been made available. A poll started on a Stater Bros. social media page shows a higher proportion of “No” votes.

She also noted that the meat department was particularly hard hit with the Stater Bros. contract. Historically one of the higher end positions due to its skill and demanding physical labor, the wages of these skilled workers are being targeted for cuts, with one worker pointing out on social media that the top pay for a meat department is “\$5 less than a deli or food clerk now.”

The blatant attempt to sow divisions among different sections of workers in order to push through a “Yes” vote is telling. This tactic of creating multi-tiered workforces to

erode wages and benefits has long been endorsed by the trade unions and can be seen most starkly in the United Auto Workers, which has rubber stamped a multi-tier wage system in the auto industry.

One Colorado King Soopers worker told the WSWS that in the UFCW contract imposed on them this past January, “They divided us by giving people in the middle of the pay scale what they deserve. Why else wouldn’t they just raise the top-out wage to give them something to stay for? The journeymen I’ve spoken to all feel the company is trying to push us out. ... I’ve been with the company since 2007. I no longer believe in the people working in the union. ... It seemed more important to coerce people into thinking we won.”

In the Texas agreement language was added to the current contract stating that “If an employee dies before receiving a vacation, which they have earned, their estate will be paid their vacation pay.” Such additions are an admission that grocery workers have been on the front lines of the pandemic and have frequently gotten sick and died from COVID-19, with many reporting multiple infections.

Workers should reject any sellout agreement that is put before them and demand a transparent and open voting procedure in which the complete contract is given to all with full time to study. Workers must demand that billions reaped off their labor by the giant grocery chains be used to fund pay raises above the rate of inflation, fully paid health care and adequate time off and a safe and healthy work environment.

Whatever the result of the voting, which may well be skewed and manipulated to suit the needs of the UFCW and the grocery companies, workers cannot allow the struggle to be contained in the union’s straitjacket. The formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and the two big business parties, is the critical task that confronts Southern Californian and all grocery workers. These committees, democratically run by the workers themselves, can formulate demands based on the needs of workers, not the profit requirements of the corporations, linking up with grocery workers and other sections of the working class in the US and internationally.

To this end, the *World Socialist Web Site* encourages workers to contact us with their stories, and we will provide all assistance in this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact