

UFCW forces through three-year deal covering 47,000 Southern California grocery workers

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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.

Late Thursday night, the United Food and Commercial Workers union claimed the ratification of a new three-year contract covering Southern California grocery workers at Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavillions. The agreement, which the union claims passed by 87 percent, was reached to avert strike action after workers voted to authorize a strike.

The contract covers 47,000 employees at 540 grocery stores from San Diego to San Luis Obispo. It follows the April 9 approval of a separate contract between six of the seven UFCW locals and the Stater Bros grocery chain. Many workers have expressed anger that the entire process was carried out undemocratically. Despite being given an option to vote electronically on whether to authorize strike action, workers were forced to show up in person over a short three-day period to cast their votes for a contract which they were never even sent copies of. Instead, they were only able to view the deal in person during the voting itself.

Kroger, the parent company of the grocery chains, agreed to raises of 19 to 31 percent, spread across three years, over current pay levels for most workers, while part-time workers were guaranteed 28 hours weekly, an addition of four more hours per week.

Part-time employees make up the majority of the grocery store workforce, around 70 percent. The casualization of this section of workers was made possible by the unions over the course of decades. The 28-hour minimum guaranteed for part-timers is a win for the company who will now use it to exploit the

bottom tier of workers to the fullest extent.

Of the remaining 30 percent of workers who are full-time, there are three tiers. At the end of the three-year contract, the highest paid will make \$26.75, up from \$22.50 (an increase of 19 percent). The second tier, lower-paid deli workers and shelf stockers, will go from \$17.02 to \$22.27, an increase of 30 percent. The lowest third tier, baggers and clerk's helpers, will see a 6 percent rise from \$15.39 to \$16.34.

The grocery companies expressed their satisfaction with the deal. An official statement from Ralphs said the company was "pleased" with the agreement, and Albertsons called it "fair and equitable."

Burt Flickinger, the managing director of Strategic Resources Group, a retail consulting firm, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "This is the best contract for the employees in 20 years, *but also for the companies* [emphasis added]... We have the most acute worker shortage since World War II. Higher wages and benefits are an investment in worker loyalty and productivity."

Flickinger also noted that in 25 years, union membership in Southern California grocery stores declined from 90 to 35 percent as non-union chains, like Target and Walmart, expanded into food. This in itself is a devastating indictment of the unions, who have presided over decades of concessions that have closed the gap between union and nonunion wages. Workers increasingly see the UFCW as a pro-company outfit that takes dues from their paycheck and does little else.

In January, at the start of negotiations, the companies offered just a \$1.80 raise an hour over three years for the highest-paid long-term employees, including

cashiers. While they ultimately agreed to \$4.25, this was still short of the \$5 increase that the union was fighting for. However, even this amount would not have kept up with the rising cost of inflation.

Sara, a San Diego Vons worker, told the WSWs, “I honestly think the Union tricked us; the contract obviously doesn’t benefit us, so I didn’t even bother signing it because it’s just a dollar raise a year. The five dollars an hour promised should have been automatic. Gas is expensive, food is expensive, we need more pay and the store can afford it.” She also added that the price of gas is taking a heavy toll. “I have to care for my parents, which means I need to drive an hour or more a day.”

Sara has worked at Vons since 2015 and said that she was consistently scheduled to work between 36–39 hours per week so that she remained below the 40-hour threshold for full time which would entitle her to full time benefits. “Then they put me in 7 days a week to make it harder to get a second job. I turned down a promotion because the responsibilities would outweigh the raise, which was only 25–50 cents more an hour.”

She added, “The stores give the union money out of our pockets. I think the union needs to be publicly audited!”

In 1990, according to a report by the Economic Roundtable, the highest-paid food clerk for a Southern California Kroger store made \$13.65 an hour, or the equivalent of \$28.32 today. This 22 percent decline in wages occurred as the company made more and more workers part time “so few of even the best-paid frontline employees make middle-class incomes.”

Grocery workers have also been on the front lines of the pandemic, with little to no protections against the airborne virus. According to the UFCW Local 770, there have been at least 10,248 confirmed COVID-positive cases among members of the LA-area local since the beginning of the pandemic. Both the number of those who have died or those suffering from persistent issues and Long COVID are not provided, however it is likely that dozens of Local 770 members have died.

The fact that such a staggering number of workers have been allowed to be infected with likely thousands dying across the country, while the UFCW worked to keep them on the job, reveals the role of the UFCW as a corporatist arm of management. The UFCW has

presided over the abysmal and deadly conditions while grocery workers have been on the front lines of the pandemic, meanwhile sabotaging every struggle that would jeopardize its cozy relationship with the grocery giants.

The fight has really only just begun. If workers are to win in a struggle for better pay and working conditions, they must draw the lessons of these experiences, organize independently and in opposition to the trade union bureaucracies which are tied to the Democratic Party that has long overseen extreme social inequality in the state and beyond. To find out more about forming a rank-and-file committee and to tell us about the conditions at your workplace, please contact the WSWs.



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