

UFCW forces through contracts for Texas and Louisiana Kroger grocery workers, provoking growing indignation

Cordell Gascoigne
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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.

Last week, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 455 announced the ratification of contracts for thousands of Kroger grocery store workers in the Houston, Texas, area and parts of Louisiana.

The deals, rapidly pushed through by the UFCW, contain wage increases below inflation, maintaining and even worsening the impoverished conditions that many Kroger workers face. The announcement of the ratification came almost at the same time that the UFCW forced through a three-year contract for tens of thousands Southern California grocery workers at Ralphs, owned by Kroger, as well as the chains Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions.

The contracts in Texas and Louisiana are the culmination of a two-year effort by the UFCW to block a struggle by grocery workers. Despite the previous agreement in Houston expiring in April 2020, the union kept workers on the job throughout negotiations, ignoring two overwhelming strike authorization votes in Houston, as well as another in Louisiana.

The announcement of tentative agreements predictably came within days of the UFCW claiming that it was preparing strike action, which it clearly had no intention of carrying out.

On April 6, Local 455 President Brandon Hopkins wrote in a statement, “The membership ‘Get-Together’ that was scheduled on April 7th, at 7PM will be rescheduled following the successful ratification of the Houston contracts.”

Hopkins’ 2021 salary was over \$321,000, a 23 percent increase (\$60,000) over his approximate \$261,000 salary

at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, according to the Labor Organization Annual Report. This is over 10 times more than what an average Kroger worker makes. Additionally, former UFCW Local 455 President Bill Hopkins, the father of Brandon Hopkins, was still paid a \$101,000 salary in 2021, despite retiring from the union in early 2020.

Attempting to present ratification as a foregone conclusion, Hopkins continued, “The local will be recommending the acceptance of this deal and to conclude our 2020-2022 bargaining round with the Company. We will be back at the bargaining table when our CBA [collective bargaining agreement] expires in 2024”—in other words, the contract that workers have yet to even vote on.

The last statement is particularly significant, given that the union did not distribute the details of the contract until workers were at the voting booths. The UFCW kept the contract concealed until the votes last week, with the local saying on Facebook that the TA would only “be available upon request at the voting locations.” This allowed Kroger workers virtually no time to study the contract’s contents.

Local 455 claimed that the contract in the Houston area was approved by a margin of 97 percent for those in the Clerk category and 94 percent for those in the Meat category but did not release vote totals or the percentage of workers who voted.

The announcement of the results provoked angry responses by workers who had not yet seen the contract or been able to vote. One worker wrote on Local 455’s Facebook page, “Kroger associates voted without having seen the new contract, I challenge local 455 to put the new contract on their website, we want to see the

negotiations fiasco of more than two years. Tell the truth to the members of the union, the new contract does not benefit Kroger workers, only the union and Kroger came out on top.”

Another worker said about the UFCW’s claimed ratification margins, “That right there is a lie I never even voted.”

For many workers, if not all, it would appear that the raises are far below the rate of inflation. Kroger states that Houston-area workers will receive two raises of 50 cents or more over the next year. For a full-time clerk making \$11.50, that would be an increase of 4.3 percent, almost half the rate of inflation of 8.5 percent, meaning an actual cut in real pay of around 4 percent.

The UFCW also touted the fact that Kroger agreed to move workers into a health care plan jointly managed with the union. While the UFCW claims that this will result in lower deductibles and out-of-pocket costs for workers in the near term, the union itself will be given a direct hand and further incentive to impose reductions in benefits down the line.

In Texas, Louisiana and in other states, the UFCW has done everything it can to avoid calling walkouts, despite widespread support for a struggle by grocery workers.

In Southern California, UFCW Local 770 announced in the opening days of April that a strike was averted due to a tentative agreement. An overwhelming 95 percent of the 47,000 grocery workers represented by Local 770 had earlier voted to authorize a strike. Despite the tentative agreement being announced April 4, workers, as with those represented under Local 455, were denied the right to view the details of the contract until the day of voting.

Where the UFCW has been compelled to call strikes, it has worked to isolate and shut them down as quickly as possible on the companies’ terms. In January, UFCW Local 7, abruptly ended a 10-day strike by over 8,000 workers in Denver, Colorado, at King Soopers—which is owned by Kroger—forcing them back to work before being able to vote on the agreement. The agreement contained starting wages only slightly above the minimum wage in Denver, while increasing health care premiums.

The massive strike authorization votes by Kroger workers in Texas, Louisiana, California and elsewhere are an expression of the growing movement of workers in the United States and internationally against poverty wages and the surging cost of living. Rising food and energy prices, driven by the coronavirus pandemic and the US-

NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine are sparking strikes and demonstrations in Sri Lanka, Peru, North Africa, the Middle East, to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and other major capitalist countries.

However, workers are again and again running up against the pro-corporate policies of the trade unions, which are working to impose contracts which throttle workers’ wages below inflation, entailing cuts to workers’ buying power for years to come.

A fundamental feature in the degeneration of the trade unions is their integration into the capitalist state. US President Joe Biden, speaking to a legislative conference of North America’s Building Trades Unions in the first week of April, is seeking to put together a “labor front” with the AFL-CIO as the White House accelerates its preparations for direct military conflict with Russia. This “labor front” would effectively act as a labor police force, attempting to discipline workers and impose the corporations’ demands.

However, a rebellion is growing among workers against the low-wage regime imposed for decades by the unions, as evidenced by a series of overwhelmingly rejections of union-endorsed contracts since the beginning of 2021. This embryonic movement must be armed with new organizations and a new perspective.

The WSWS urges workers to form rank-and-file committees at every workplace, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the corporate syndicates known as trade unions. Such organizations will provide the means for workers to break through their isolation and communicate across different companies, cities, states and countries. They will also lay the groundwork for a much broader struggle by the working class internationally for higher wages and better living conditions and against the danger of a third world war.



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