

“It’s hard to believe they work for us”: Central Indiana Kroger workers speak out against rejected UFCW contract

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The United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) Local 700 restarted talks with Kroger management on Monday after 8,000 Kroger workers throughout the Indianapolis area voted to reject a tentative agreement. The tentative agreement contained grossly inadequate pay raises, with no more than \$0.65 per hour for many, increases to some health care plans, and no changes to paid time off or working conditions that would benefit workers.

On social media, workers expressed anger and frustration with UFCW negotiators for even bringing the previous deal to a vote. Kroger workers in central Indiana face rapidly rising living conditions in the region of the US where they work and live, compounded by nationwide inflation, currently at 8.6 percent.

The UFCW is concealing any details of the negotiations from workers. The last update on negotiations, posted Monday, simply read: “Your Union Negotiating Committee is continuing to evaluate, cost, and assess additional proposals. The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) was present for today’s discussions and will also join us on Wednesday. Employees continue working under the current terms and conditions of the contract. Should you have any questions or desire further information, please contact your Union Representative.”

Workers are demanding the right to study the contract for several days before voting on it, instead of being given highlights at the last minute and pressured to vote “yes.” Workers have demanded as well to be able to participate in the negotiations and know everything that is discussed between the union and company for a contract which will determine the conditions under which they and their families live for the next three years.

“I feel the first contract offer was just a starting point,” a Kroger worker from central Indiana told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “For the union to say they had to fight for that contract, I believe, is some form of negotiation tactics. I also believe there may be some kind of bonus for Union negotiation teams or even the Union Reps to get the contract passed quickly. I don’t have proof of that, it’s just hard to believe they

work for us. Our reps who came in hadn’t had the information for very long before handing it to us and telling us, ‘It’s a great contract, you should sign it.’ So I don’t know how they could say they were looking out for our best interests.

“There is a complete disconnect between the Union and its members. It seems the Union is in Kroger’s pocket. We NEVER see any reps in our stores except when it’s time to vote. The idea that we could drop down in pay for a year is something that should never be OK. There are times Kroger will cut hours, so you could potentially drop down to the lower tier status and pay, which, I feel, could be their main goal because then they won’t need to pay as much in health insurance benefits.

“I have been with Kroger for 10 years but we have never been through anything like this before: COVID, now inflation. What I really wish Kroger and the union would realize is these people taking to social media, fighting Kroger for fair wages because their prices have gone up (along with everything else), care about their jobs! They want to keep their jobs! They are loyal, hardworking, dedicated employees. They stayed when things got hard, when things were scary, when people needed food, when people needed their medicine. It seems Kroger has forgotten all about that while they were making tons of money through the pandemic and many businesses closed.

“Now the health insurance is going up, and union dues. That one stings since it’s hard to tell what they do for us. It’s very hard to compare to past contracts, because we’ve never gone through what we are now going through.”

The UFCW and Kroger have brought a federal mediator into negotiations, usually a sign that both parties are seeking to prevent a strike. However, support for strike action is high among workers. One worker commented on the UFCW Local 700 Facebook page, “I find it ironic that some people are saying ‘I don’t have enough money to strike’ ... that’s because you’re not getting paid enough!”

Ruth, a central Indiana Kroger worker, spoke late last week to the mood of workers at her store. “I think the majority at my store would possibly strike. People are talking about the requirements for strike pay, and just this morning I came up

with an idea for a side gig should I need it. I have also been kind of stocking up on nonperishable foods for a couple weeks. I have cut back on any kind of extras when they announced in May about the extension, and I had heard then that they were having issues with the insurance initially.

“There’s a lot of tension and anxiety going on with everyone. The contract is pretty much the only topic on breaks, etc. Those of us who have been there prior to 2020 and COVID are still pretty honked off about our \$2 per hour ‘hero bonus’ being revoked. But, I’d also say lately there’s more of a sense of camaraderie, in that we are sort of all on the same page in opposition to this proposal. Since the union and Kroger don’t meet again until next Monday and Wednesday, we’re all kind of in limbo right now. I imagine I will hear via their Facebook. Unless the negotiators grow some balls, I foresee another extension.”

She also denounced the way that the UFCW has kept workers in the dark and isolated them during the contract talks, undermining the democratic process. “I’m not too impressed at all with the exchange of information regarding the negotiations. It’s been rumors and what I read on [UFCW Local 700] Facebook page. This time, the union dropped off the highlights pamphlets on Tuesday, came briefly to answer questions Wednesday morning, and my store voted Thursday. I wish they had told us earlier, but as I understand it, the negotiators were told not to discuss until they had the printed material. One of the negotiating team works in my store and said the company claims it’s because the minimum wage is higher out [in California and Colorado] that we are getting much lower raises. I think that’s lame, since who says we think our \$7.25 minimum wage is right?”

Ruth described the conditions that have led many Kroger workers to feel that they have reached a breaking point. “We’re pretty short handed in my department at all times. It’s like we’re all little worker bees buzzing around trying to do our jobs, but I almost never get done. I used to stay over sometimes as much as 1-2 hours, but won’t anymore. I get scheduled a sixth day, usually only 4 hours, every two to three weeks, but lately they’ve been scheduling me for more of them, and for six hours instead of four.

“I don’t mind working hard, but I don’t think we should have to just because Kroger can’t get enough help. I actually want to do a good job and do my job well, but mostly I struggle to get the bare minimum done. I’m personally less likely to stay overtime since they took our hero pay when we ‘were all in this together.’ I’ll be in this together with you til my eight hours is up, then I’m out.

“I think COVID has taken a toll on us all. One worker and her spouse got it early on, and he had lingering issues and died in the fall. We also lost a front end team member last fall, and another ended up in the ICU for awhile. Store-wide, we had 13 workers out one week just last month. Having more workers would help as we all wouldn’t have to work so hard ALL THE

TIME.”

Whatever agreement the union comes back to workers with after Wednesday remains to be seen. But what is certain is that the UFCW does not want to threaten the profits of the multibillion-dollar corporation and largest grocery chain in the US. In all likelihood, the next agreement that the union attempts to push through will be negotiated completely in the interests of the company and will continue to leave Kroger workers in the position of being extremely exploited for profit.

The WSWS supports Kroger workers in voting against any contract that does not meet all of their demands for a decent standard of living and the best possible working conditions.

Central Indiana Kroger workers who want to fight back and take strike action against the company must begin organizing themselves independently in order to fight both Kroger and the trade union bureaucracy. The UFCW is following a well-worn playbook. Earlier this year, it shut down the King Soopers strike in Colorado when it was at its strongest, and blocked strike action among Southern California and Texas grocery workers despite a majority of workers pressing for strike action. In each case, it pushed through a concessions contract without allowing workers adequate time to study before voting.

To organize a genuine struggle and prevent the UFCW from attempting to force through yet another concessions contract, workers must take the initiative to build new organizations that will fight for their interests: rank-and-file workplace committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves.

To win their demands for higher pay and better working conditions, the isolation of workers by region and store and the blacking out of negotiations between Kroger and the UFCW must end. Workers must come together to demand oversight of the negotiations between the local and the company, with all contract talks live streamed, as well as oversight of the balloting process for the next proposal and any strike vote that takes place.

To find out how you can join the fight to build a rank-and-file committee at your store, fill out the form below today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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