“Organize a ‘no’ vote among your coworkers”: Open letter from an Indianapolis Kroger worker

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The World Socialist Web Site *received the following letter from a Kroger worker in Indianapolis, which we are publishing in full here with minor edits for clarity. The worker’s name has been changed to Ruth to protect her identity.*

Indianapolis Kroger workers are voting this week on a second tentative agreement brought by the United Food and Commercial Workers union, after they voted to reject an earlier agreement several weeks ago. There is significant anger among the rank-and-file to the new deal, which is substantially the same as the first.

The UFCW, meanwhile, has kept workers on the job throughout, including through the lucrative Fourth of July holiday. In response, workers have founded the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which released a statement yesterday calling for a rejection of the second tentative agreement and the calling of a strike.

To join the committee, fill out the form at the bottom of this article.

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Friends, sisters and brothers please allow me to introduce myself. My name is “Ruth” and I am a Kroger associate and dues paying member of the UFCW 700, and also a member of the newly formed Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee. I prefer not to use my real name so as to not open myself up to possible retaliation from Kroger and or the Union.

Like you, I've been concerned about the negotiations of our contract. Our old deal expired May 14 and was extended to June 18 after we voted down the first offer on June 3. If you recall, our union agents brought us the initial proposal on Tuesday May 31, the day after a holiday. They were in stores to answer questions on Wednesday, June 1, and then we had to vote on Thursday and Friday. Some of us got only 24 to 48 hours to read it.

I found the team assigned to my store to answer our questions rather vague and snippy. Even my own union rep seemed unfamiliar with the contract when I asked questions. I saw enough I didn't like. Coupled with the feeling that they were trying to rush this through, I voted no, along with 1,417 others, versus 1,362 who voted yes. The union went back to the bargaining table and ended up extending our contract to July 15, largely to accommodate the needs of the mediators, who could not meet until June 30.

Then presto! On July 5 they returned with a one-page summary which made clear it’s the same proposal as last month, except that the company has agreed to pay out raises from June 19, the start date of the second extension. The summary said there would be three days of voting beginning in a little over a week, July 13, 14 and 15.

This was less about allowing us more time to read the proposal and ask questions, since we've been reading and re-reading it over the last few weeks, and more about allowing allow various union and corporate big shots time to come in and discuss it with our associates. While other companies like Starbucks and Amazon have recently spent millions of dollars to prevent their companies from even forming a union, Kroger also seems to be pushing for this contract, suggesting to me it favors Kroger.

I fall in the category of a Step 3 full time associate. Under the contract, I will receive a $2,500 bribe “ratification bonus,” but only $0.65 an hour as a raise. Both are far too low. I think this new-fangled tier program completely benefits Kroger more than the worker. Why is the union even agreeing to it?

Remember how back before there were no COVID tests or vaccines, when we were so “essential” they called us “heroes” and proudly hung out the big “HEROES WORK HERE” banners? Remember how Kroger was about the last company to give out the $2 an hour so-called “hero bonus” and was among the first ones to drop it? Again, this was largely only to keep in line those of us who had to continue working and pick up the slack, while many of our fellow members had no choice but to take leave to take care of their kids who couldn't go to school. I bear no ill will towards them, they were in an impossible situation. And remember when the CEO got over $21 million in bonus that year and Kroger bought back hundreds of millions of their own stock in 2020?

Fast forward to October 2021. We all got raises that were not specified in our 2019 contract. The newest employees got $2.50. Three-year employees got around $1.50 to $2.00, and employees with four or more years got $0.30 to $0.50. We were told our “negotiators can use this in May to get you all $2

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raises.” But this was really to allow Kroger to compete in the so-called labor shortage, because none of our competitors were hiring in at such low rates.

My store is still drastically understaffed even at this pay rate. When CEO Rodney McMullen got about $18 million and Kroger bought back millions of their own stock, all they gave us was a jar of peanut butter last December and a “thank you bonus” on our cards for $100.

In April we got letters from the president of our UFCW division, Colleen Juergensen, gushing on and on about how wonderful we all are and thanking us for our help. I remember opening it and thinking “What is this all about? I guess this is our raise.” Sadly, since my landlord needs money for my rent which increased a lot the month before, and they weren’t going to take the letter in lieu of actual money, I threw it away.

She sent us another letter this week again, expressing her gratitude and appreciation and explaining why this contract is so good for us: the words “fair and balanced” are used. I'd argue that its balanced more towards Kroger. I’d also ask why the employees only getting $0.65 more while the ones we are training are getting double. Is that “fair and balanced?”

She has five bullet points where she talks about how this is indeed larger than our last contract, then how the “ratification bonus” would be received two weeks after the date of ratification. In the next bullet point her exact words are “*following ratification* of this contract on July 24. [emphasis added]” Does she simply assume the contract will pass on July 15? Or has it already been signed by the UFCW regardless of the outcome of the vote which hasn't even occurred yet?

I strongly encourage as many members as possible go to their union rep’s last voting site on Friday evening and observe the counting process. We should have enough present to look for inconsistencies and verify what the outcome is.

I've talked a little bit about the raises, the bonus bribe, and how much I dislike the 3-step tier program. It’s especially unfair to the utility clerks, who do so much for an awfully crummy wage, currently at $10 per hour.

The union is posting various updates on their Facebook page a couple of times a day to try to shove this down our throats. Go read the many comments of your peers. They are livid and want to vote this thing down. I'd like to address a couple common objections.

To those who say to us, “If you don’t like it, why don’t you leave?” There are many reasons, but we have a right to fight for Kroger to be a better workplace because we are the ones who do all of the work to make this company as profitable as it is. And who's to say a new job would be better?

To those who are thinking, “I don't want to strike so I'm voting yes,” we know this is not the best possible contract we can get, and I think we should force them to try again. Part of why strikes work is they create negative publicity for the company and risk the public boycotting the stores. But a strike is most effective because we, the workers, are withholding our labor power, which is what the company needs to make profits. Without us, they can’t run, and if we go on strike to turn our struggle out to workers in our area, we have the opportunity to bring others in to support our fight.

There are very explicit rules regarding how a strike can occur and according to the contract that the union keeps extending, we could be fired for an illegal strike. But I recognize the will to strike because the situation is so dire. We do not have to accept the framework of the UFCW that is intent on protecting Kroger and blocking strikes with the 2/3 majority clause. We can begin organizing action in the rank-and-file committee beginning with the largest possible No vote on this contract.

I encourage you to read the rank-and-file committee statements on the WSWS, talk them over with your spouse or partner, talk to your friends and co-workers, and ask questions. If you believe we’re being screwed over by Kroger and the UFCW, VOTE NO on Wednesday, Thursday or Friday, whichever is your store's voting day. If it’s your day off, you can vote at another location during their voting hours. If you don’t drive, ask one of your co-workers for a ride.

Vote your conscience, but ask yourself, is this really the best deal we can get for ALL of us? If you do not vote, are you willing to accept what your fellow associates vote for? But do not vote for anything just out of fear. I'm willing to vote for a third or fourth or as many times as it takes to get the best deal that meets our needs.

A lot of us are angry and want to do something about this. You can do something about this. You do not need to be a socialist to join this committee, but you should understand that the UFCW is not going to fight for us. It will take as many of us as possible to take action to change our situation.

Organize a no vote among your coworkers and organize your coworkers to watch the ballots being counted. Help us build this rank-and-file committee, because whatever the outcome of this contract vote, the fight will not end here.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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