

UFCW claims passage of Indianapolis Kroger contract, deletes local's Facebook page in response to opposition

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Update: In response to internet censorship by the UFCW, The Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee has founded a Facebook group to provide Kroger workers around the country with a platform to facilitate discussion about working conditions and share information.

On Friday night, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 700 claimed the ratification of a concessions contract covering 8,000 Kroger grocery retail workers across the Central Indiana region. The contract was passed without even half of the eligible membership voting, in the face of widespread opposition from workers to its corporate-friendly concessions.

The July 15 update posted on the UFCW Local 700 website read: “Members of UFCW Local 700 have approved a new three-year contract with Kroger; the proposed contract covers more than 8,000 workers at 68 stores in Central Indiana. The count was 1892 voting yes—1243 voting no.”

It then provides a vague outline of the terms of the contract: “Guarantees pay raises[!] over the life of the contract; Increases starting pay rates and premium pay; Provides lump-sum compensation for top-rated and grandfathered workers, and Department Heads; Protects quality, affordable health care for members and your families; Improves health care benefits; Secures and expands pension benefits,” and “Strengthens contract language.”

The UFCW did not attempt to paint these concessions as a “victory,” knowing very well that they were not. What exactly are the concessions that are contained in the contract that so many workers voiced opposition to before the votes were counted?

In reality, the contract was little changed from the one which workers rejected weeks prior. Most workers’ starting wage would rise less than \$1 to just \$14.25 per hour at the start and increase only \$0.75 per hour in each of the following two years. Pharmacy technicians, who also start at \$13 under the current contract, would see an increase to \$15.75 per hour and just \$0.50 increases in each of the

following two years.

Department heads, hourly workers with greater responsibilities, will get less than \$1.50 per hour raise for the first year and \$0.50 raises for each of the following two years. Assistant department heads and department heads whose starting wages are not tied to store sales are offered just \$0.65 in wage increases per year for each year of the contract.

Utility clerks, one of the lowest-paid tiers of workers, will start at the poverty wage of \$12.25 and receive paltry \$0.50 increases for each of the following two years.

Health care benefits will not substantially change for workers, and costs may increase for some. Workers will continue to earn little paid time off in comparison to the number of hours worked for the company under the new contract. Workers in the Step 3 tier at top pay received a signing bonus between \$2,500 for full-time workers and \$1,000 for part-time workers, which rank-and-file workers denounced as a bribe to get them to accept major pay cuts in the face of skyrocketing inflation.

With inflation officially at 9 percent nationwide, the highest in 40 years, the contract proposed by the UFCW is a major real wage cut for workers through 2025. The state’s living wage calculator lists \$13.44 per hour as the minimum—in reality a poverty wage, and what full-time clerks will be paid to start is just barely above this.

One day after the contract vote totals were released by the UFCW, and after workers flooded the page with comments in opposition to the sellout contract and accused the union of manipulating the vote, Local 700 took down its Facebook page ostensibly for “maintenance,” and ultimately deleted it entirely.

One Kroger worker denounced the union on social media, saying “Funny how as soon as I commented on the UFCW Local 700 recent post they immediately deleted my comment and the other reply and blocked me from seeing the post. They know that they are scared of the real truth and

I really don't want to be a part of the union anymore since they don't do anything anyway and they also keep raising the dues so they can make more money.

"Even if you call the rep they never get back to you. You call several times, and nothing. And when you ask them they say 'Oh well we tried calling you and left voicemails.' Total lie because they didn't. You should be ashamed of yourselves!!"

Another worker said that soon after the contract was passed, and before the page was taken down, "UFCW 700 keeps deleting everyone's posts and blocking members if they criticize the contract proposal."

There is no reason to believe the official totals released by the UFCW. If it is the case, however, that a majority of those voting did indeed vote "yes," this was only under conditions in which the UFCW attempted to portray the deal as virtually a "done deal" and that a rejection, as was the case with the first contract, would only lead to the union bringing back another deal the same as the first.

Under the control of the UFCW, the voting process was inherently undemocratic. Workers were only allowed to vote in-person at their store within two one-and-a-half-hour time slots scheduled by the union. If their work schedules did not coincide with one of the time slots at their store, they either had to travel to another store or come in while they were off work to vote. Many workers who were on vacation, out sick or for personal reasons were not able to vote at all.

Most workers did not know that they had the right to watch votes being counted at stores after the voting concluded. UFCW representatives did not give workers clear and timely information on their rights regarding when and how they could watch votes being counted.

Second, workers were kept in the dark by the UFCW throughout the negotiations. Workers received no detailed updates on the negotiations, only to be notified when the union had extended the contract, and the no-strike clause, yet again. The constant extensions allowed Kroger to continue to rake in profits over holiday weekends while workers struggled to pay for necessities with poverty-level wages that had been negotiated three years prior to the contract expiration.

Third, workers voted down essentially the same contract that was passed earlier on June 3 after the first round of negotiations. Workers were told by UFCW representatives that a "no" vote on the tentative agreement was a vote for a strike, which large numbers of the 8,000 rank-and-file members of the local supported.

Yet the UFCW refused to honor the workers' demands for strike action, citing a bogus clause requiring 2/3 of the total voting membership to vote "no" for a contract in order for a strike vote to be initiated. The union used this clause against

workers to protect the profit interests of the Kroger corporation.

The fight at Kroger is not over. Kroger workers have to take the fight into their own hands and build the independent Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee as an organ of workers power that will fight in the interests of the working class.

As the last statement of the committee said, "The basic problem is that the UFCW is run as an unaccountable bureaucracy, not as a genuine democratic organization. Workers in some locals report that top officials are not even elected but appointed. But even in cases where officials are elected, their loyalty is to their salaries and to hoarding the hundreds of millions in union assets. This means that the fight of Kroger workers must begin with the fight to establish rank-and-file control.

"We are 8,000-strong across the region, and over 450,000-strong across the US. If we can unite our struggles, we can win. But this can only happen if we break free from the isolation imposed by the UFCW and build this committee, which has the power to link up workers across industries, across the country and the world in a united struggle against corporate rule."

Worker should now take the following steps:

- Demand a recount of the vote totals. Was voting manipulated, and how? Was there intimidation and misinformation spread by the union? How was voting conducted at each store, and how were votes tallied?

- Oppose the UFCW's scorched-earth censorship policy of shutting down their Facebook page. If the union refuses to provide workers with a forum for free and open discussion, which any genuine workers organization would do, then workers should form their own social media groups, moderated by trusted rank-and-file workers themselves, with union officials screened out to prevent spying.

If you agree with this, join the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee! Fill out the form below for more information.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact