Kroger workers of Columbus, Ohio: Vote “NO” on the UFCW’s sellout contract! Build a nationwide movement of grocery workers!

Kroger workers rank-and-file committee
24 July 2022

Brothers and sisters working at Kroger stores in the Columbus, Ohio, region:

The Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee extends its solidarity to you in your fight to vote down the sellout contract negotiated by Kroger and UFCW Local 1059 this coming Tuesday and Wednesday. In particular, we send greetings from the thousands of Indianapolis workers who support you.

The Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee strongly encourages a “No” vote on this miserable concessions contract. Organize carpools for workers who need assistance getting to the polling locations to vote. Do not be intimidated or bullied by union functionaries, who will attempt to pressure you into voting “yes.” You have the right to vote based on your interests, free from influence from the pro-corporate UFCW.

You will have the support of workers all over the region, country and world for your struggles. From industrial workers in the states of Ohio, Michigan and Indiana, to rail workers worldwide, to striking Sri Lankan workers who forced the resignation of their corrupt president, you have the support of the global working class behind you.

In the face of national inflation at over 9 percent, the contract proposal is woefully inadequate to meet your needs. The base pay increase over three years is just 65 cents in the first year, followed by 50 cents in the last two years. Top pay for clerks will rise to the poverty pay of $18.25 an hour by the end of the contract. Pay for new hires will increase from $12 to $14.25 an hour, but they will now wait a year to move to the next pay scale rather than at the established intervals in the previous contract.

A divisive tier system will pit workers in the same store against one another in a race to the bottom for wages. The contract proposal completely overhauls the progression system. Senior clerks will be “red circled” and elevated to $17.75 an hour from the previous top pay of $17.10, with a top pay rate at the end of the contract of $18.75.

To add insult to injury, workers in the Columbus region can only move up to the next step in pay if they work whatever is considered to be full-time hours for a year, an average of 34 hours a week for the second step and 36 for the third. This means that if workers need to take time off or the company prevents them from working full-time hours through scheduling, then there is no way for them to progress to the next step in pay for their position.

Based on this, thousands of workers will not even make as much money as the contract claims. If you are a part-time worker in the second tier who does not progress to the next step, you will make just $14.95 an hour by the end of the contract, a 70 cent raise over three years.

Workers in Columbus also need to be on guard against attempts by the union to get you to vote against your conscience by dangling a signing bonus in front of you, taking advantage of the desperate financial situation that it has helped to create for workers.

This draconian pay scale and enshrining of a caste of part-time workers is designed to ensure the largest possible profits for Kroger. That it was negotiated by the UFCW demonstrates that the “union” works for Kroger, not for us.

In Indianapolis, Kroger workers of UFCW Local 700 voted down a similar contract in May. But the UFCW did not respond to our democratic decision by coming back with a better contract. Instead, they made us vote again on virtually the same contract and claimed that it had passed.

Even in the case that this is true, in the sense that the UFCW did not flagrantly stuff the ballot, the union secured this outcome by deliberately making it as difficult as possible for Indianapolis workers to exercise their right to vote on the contract. First, voting on the second contract offer was limited to two one-and-a-half hour slots at each store over three days. This made it inconvenient for workers whose shift times did not coincide with voting times at their store, forcing them to travel long distances in some cases. There was no mail-in or online voting option, so workers

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who were taking time off or on vacation were unable to vote.

Second, the union tried to bully workers into voting yes, at times threatening to leave workers high and dry if we went on strike, in spite of a multimillion dollar strike fund that they control but which we pay dues to maintain. In fact, many workers were willing to and preparing to strike, but the union refused to call a strike, citing an arbitrary rule that two thirds of the membership must vote "no" on a contract for a strike to be considered.

Third, the UFCW did not properly inform workers of their rights for observing the vote counting at the end of the last day of balloting. Workers were given misinformation from different reps or were simply not told that they had a right to observe votes being counted at the stores.

When the "passage" of the deal in these circumstances evoked a storm of protest, UFCW Local 700 responded with scorched-earth censorship by deleting its Facebook page entirely.

Using different means for the same purpose, the UFCW Local 1059 is making it difficult for workers to exercise their right to vote. Voting in Columbus is taking place at four locations that are distant from some of the stores and only on two weekdays, a tactic used by the union during the King Soopers vote in Colorado that ended in a concessions contract being forced through.

Columbus workers cannot leave this struggle in the hands of the UFCW! The union bureaucrats are backed by the corporations and their powerful financial interests. They will block every effort to reform it in order to maintain their privileges, such as the six-figure salaries that top officials are paid through our union dues and the control of the massive strike fund. As workers prepare to vote down this contract, the union is planning to do everything in its power to isolate Columbus workers, just as they did in Indianapolis and Denver, and in Colorado, California, Texas and Louisiana earlier this year.

In 2018, UFCW Local 1059 pushed through an early contract that included wage "increases" to $10 and $11 an hour and kept workers locked in this low rate for four years, derailing the original contract duration which was set to expire in 2020. The union did this to support the interests of the Kroger corporation's monopolistic expansion in the company's "Restock Kroger" plan, demonstrating that the union that supposedly represents us consciously serves as a partner in corporate management.

To prepare for a fightback, rank-and-file workers need a strategy which can unite us, form essential lines of communication across stores and different regions, capable of challenging both the corrupt UFCW bureaucracy and Kroger management. The framework for this begins with the building of the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee. We urge our brothers and sisters in Columbus to contact us today and begin building local committees of your own.

These committees will also provide workers with a democratic forum to discuss what their demands are. We propose the following:

• Demand the immediate convocation of a strike vote in the event that the contract is voted down. Rank-and-file workers must have full control of the strike fund if a strike is called so that no one has to starve while on strike.

• Remove obstacles to voting on the contract. If the contract is voted down and goes to a second vote, ensure that workers can vote at any time of day at their stores or remotely if they cannot be at a store when voting takes place. Intimidation of any kind by union functionaries before voting will not be tolerated.

• Demand workers' oversight of the balloting and ballot counting process and negotiations. Workers can begin organizing themselves at stores to observe the final vote counts together. No more closed-door negotiations with the corporation if the contract goes back to the bargaining table. Livestream all negotiations with the company and give workers full oversight of voting and vote counting to be on guard for any manipulation by UFCW officials.

•End the blackout of our struggle! For a national contract for all Kroger workers! Virtually nothing has been posted in the media or on the UFCW or local webpages or social media platforms about this contract struggle. Our brothers and sisters have a right to know and support our demands. The deliberate blackout of information is a tool used by the corporations and unions to suppress opposition and promote a false sense of isolation.

Kroger workers are not helpless. There are half a million of us across the country. In opposition to the UFCW's artificial division of the Kroger workforce into different regions, we call for the unification of Kroger workers across the country.

If workers can recognize and mobilize the power we have to fight together against wage concessions and demeaning working conditions, we can win this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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