“My entire store plans on voting no”—Significant opposition from Ohio Kroger workers to UFCW-backed contract

Our reporters
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The World Socialist Web Site has received many comments from Kroger grocery workers in Columbus, Ohio, denouncing a three-year contract brought by the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1059. Voting on the deal, which contains substandard wage increases and a divisive multi-tier wage structure, takes place Tuesday and Wednesday. The WSWS publishes a selection of these comments below.

Are you a Kroger worker in Columbus? We want to hear from you! What do you think about the contract? What do you think Kroger workers need? Contact us by filling out the form at the end of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

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“My entire store plans on voting no”

“My entire Kroger store plans on voting no,” wrote one worker. “I don’t know where you’re getting your information, but this new contract sucks and none of my coworkers are planning to vote yes on it. I work in the Deli/Bakery, and I’ve just been informed after almost 4 years of employment there I will only be making 50 cents more than those I will be training. I find it incredibly unfair that I’ve had to work my way up to this point. Countless days I’ve put up with such short staffing that it has been only myself working a counter in the middle of a rush.

“Not to mention the insurance, which I depend on for my own medical coverage. Our deductible has now doubled. We now have to pay a full grand out of our pockets before insurance will cover anything. I work a full 40 hours a week all year, if I can. And yet last year I made barely $28k. I shouldn’t have to spend a full $1,000 of the $28,000 I make just so I can have medical coverage.

“The cost of living has skyrocketed. I can barely afford to live where I am now. I’m currently looking at either leaving for another, higher wage job or getting a part-time job on top of the 40 hours I work now. I shouldn’t have to do either. I should be respected as a human being that deserves to live. We all should, we shouldn’t have to be pushed to our breaking point just so that we can afford to put food on the table for ourselves or our families.

“Kroger is a multimillion-dollar company if not more. The CEO of Kroger, Rodney McMullen made $22 million in 2020 after the pandemic. No one should be making that kind of money when his employees across the nation are suffering. Surely there is a way to pay us more.

“If there isn’t, the company should be looking at a possible strike. We are not going to subject ourselves to be working in these conditions. We do not deserve to be treated and paid like rats just because compared to those at corporate a lot of us may not have the access to high education. That does not make us less than you. We deserve more.”

Another worker wrote: “I have worked for Kroger for 16 years. Over those years, the company has continued to show that they don’t care as much about the employees of a store, but they do care about the sales and money made. Kroger is making more money than they ever have, yet we have employees in many of our stores that don’t know where their next meal is coming from.

“While all of us work ourselves to death in the stores, the corporate team reaps all the rewards for our efforts. All of the money in Kroger goes to the top of the company, not back to the people who really deserve it. Our CEO has a salary of more than 20 million dollars and still took a 22 million dollar bonus during the start of the pandemic. This pandemic has changed life as a retail worker, but nothing else has changed for us as far as conditions and pay go.”

“It’s almost as if this contract was written to get rid of topped-out people with families to feed”

One worker told the WSWS that the changes to the health care plan could ruin him financially. “I’m married with two kids, my wife stays at home to care for our children. Our first was born 15 weeks early, my wife has health issues. I have hit my out-of-pocket max for three years in a row, and starting in 2024, our out-of-pocket max will increase by $1,000 a year, completely wiping out all the raises together. It’s almost as if this contract was written to get rid of topped-out people with families to feed.

“By the end of this contract, with increased costs to health care and inflation, I’m not sure how anyone would be able to make ends meet. The Columbus division president for Kroger called this a good contract and recommended everyone to vote yes. Even our union, that has their salaries paid for by us, are throwing us under the bus.”

Another worker pointed to the issue of health care: “This is not a competitive wage for anyone, especially new hires. I’ve been with the
company 22 years, and to know my health care won’t be available when I retire is outrageous. I’ve had a very hard time during the past two years achieving a work/life balance, and I can’t see it getting better.”

“The wage increases are abysmal”

Many workers singled out the insulting wage increases in the new contract. One wrote: “The bonuses are a joke. They will be taxed at 22 to 35 percent, then need to be counted as wages at the end of the year and taxed again. As you stated in the story, these so-called raises will not even keep up with inflation. Just like the government doesn’t want us to succeed, it’s apparent that Kroger doesn’t either.

“For a company that makes 36 billion dollars a year, they’re not wanting to reward their employees with ANY kind of real wage increases. Also last year, the CEO gave himself a 20 million dollar raise.

“I hope this agreement gets rejected. But we also need to hope that we don’t have an extreme ballot drop throughout the night!”

Another worker said: “The wage increases are abysmal. I was hoping for at least $3 over the 3 years. I have personally been talking to people about the contract and why it is important to vote no. I’d say one-third of the people I’ve talked to have had their rent go up by hundreds of dollars the last few years. The current proposed wage scale doesn’t help them at all.

“If you figure in the bonus pay over the next 3 years, it’s roughly 22 dollars a week. That doesn’t even cover the gas increase for people. On top of that, the people that could really use the bonuses won’t even be getting one. The bonuses are just incentive for senior people to vote yes.”

“We were considered ‘heroes,’ but that didn’t last long”

The rescinding of pandemic “hero pay” is a major issue for workers. One said: “The CEO of Kroger made 18 million dollars last year, and they want to give us $1.65 over the 3 years. That’s a spit in our face for all the work we’ve done. We USED to be considered ‘heroes’ [for working in the pandemic], and for that we got hero pay. But that didn’t last too long; Kroger took that away as soon as they could.

“Kroger needs to pay their employees and quit being cheap. They want to be considered one of the top grocery chains in America and continue to make profit after profit. How about they take some of that profits, and they price gouge their customers on everything.”

Another worker said: “This is a poor example of cut and paste, this ‘negotiated contract’ is almost word for word of the one in Indiana. Over 3 million in salaries for union 1059 officers and office personnel, and we get peanuts? Union reps making over 90 grand a year telling us ‘well, no contract keeps up with the cost of living’? Bull shit!

“We are expected to take a true cut in wages by voting for this pile of crap contract AND vote for new hires to make even less? I can’t believe a thing comes out of a rep’s mouth anymore. We need to get the 30 percent to call for an election of new officers and toss these money grabbers out. They are in no way working for the rank and file. They are working to get a bigger paycheck by working for/with Kroger corporate.”

“The union is not here to work for the employees”

The collusion of the UFCW with management is another recurring theme. One worker said: “The union is not here to work for the employees; they keep raising our union dues but not enough of a pay increase to keep up with the cost of living. It’s a joke. After 26 years with the Kroger company, I am currently seeking other employment.”

A department lead wrote: “I can tell you first hand that managers are telling crews that this is the best we will get, and to vote yes or don’t vote … the union reps are almost as bad. Corporate comes in and tells us to not think of the bonus as a bonus, but a ‘pay advance’ of our future hours. The only good thing about the new contract is that Kroger caved to the ‘Union’ on health care, and instead of doubling our premiums only made it a dollar more.

“The ‘Union’ tells those of us who want to fight to keep our heads down and that this is the best they can do, while Kroger makes record profits, and they price gouge their customers on everything.”

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