

Seattle City Council repeals \$4 hazard pay for grocery workers

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Are you a Seattle grocery worker? Fill out the form at the bottom of this article to tell us how the hazard pay cut will impact you. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On August 2, the Seattle City Council voted 5 to 2 to repeal the hazard pay mandate on grocery stores with over 500 employees. The move will result in a massive pay cut for thousands of workers in the area when it goes into effect by September 10.

The mandate, originally passed in February 2021, required stores to provide a \$4 hourly pay increase to all workers, in addition to their regular pay. Councilwoman Teresa Mosqueda sponsored the legislation to appease grocery workers, who were fed up with being paid abysmally low wages despite the sacrifices they made every day as “essential” workers.

The Seattle City Council, which is composed of Democrats plus Socialist Alternative’s Kshama Sawant, who has close ties to the local Democratic Party, previously attempted to end the hazard pay requirement with an 8 to 0 vote in December 2021. Sawant did not show up to the session at the time. Due to the imminent Omicron surge that was developing at the time, former Mayor Jenny Durkan vetoed it.

This time, Mayor Bruce Harrell, a right-wing Democrat who ran on a “law and order” campaign last year, directed the council to vote on ending the mandate. Kshama Sawant and Tammy Morales symbolically voted against the repeal, while council members Lisa Herbold and Teresa Mosqueda did not show up to vote.

The decision is driven by the nationwide campaign to rip up the last public health measures implemented during the pandemic, under the guise that coronavirus is “endemic” and will never be brought under control. It comes as the CDC ends recommendations on social distancing and quarantining, paving the way for yet another massive surge of cases in the fall.

By ending the mandate, the council members are also

enforcing the suppression of wages which has preoccupied the entire political establishment. The Federal Reserve under Biden has raised interest rates in a bit to prevent a “wage-price spiral”—that is, wages which keep pace with the rising cost of goods.

Grocery workers are a highly exploited section of the working class. Decades of sellout agreements negotiated by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) have driven down their wages, benefits and working conditions. They often get paid close to minimum wage, which is currently \$17.27 in Seattle, one of the most expensive cities in the country. According to Bankrate, rent prices jumped 29 percent from 2021 to 2022, with Seattle’s average rent now standing at around \$2,774 per month.

The \$4 wage increase was wholly inadequate at the time, as it only made it bearable for workers to survive paycheck to paycheck. Even that has been entirely eaten up by soaring inflation, with workers struggling to keep up with record fuel and food costs.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers about the impact this pay cut will have on their lives, and the continued danger of COVID-19 in the workplace.

“Without the hazard pay, I am absolutely going to be food insecure,” explained one worker who has been at Safeway for 11 years, “and I worry about being able to keep my housing. I really don’t think people who make more than me should decide that I should be paid less. If they can’t live off of how much we make per hour, why do they think we can? The lack of compassion is staggering.”

She continued: “There is a huge culture of ‘you have to work no matter how sick you are,’ and people are coming down with COVID every day at my work location. I have a very bad immune system, so I seem to catch everything. I try to work overnight so that I am around fewer people, but my coworkers still come in sick, and it seems like the

sick customers are the ones not wearing masks. I've spent most of this last year sick, and it's eaten up all my savings missing so much work."

Another worker from PCC Community Markets told the WSWs: "It's infuriating. Hazard pay is supposed to be because there is a hazard on the job. It's not safe. In order to earn our income and do our jobs, we have to interact with the public, which means we're constantly exposed to COVID. A lot of us have had it before, and we still get an email once or twice a week reporting a positive case at the store. It's not required to wear masks anymore, so some people do, and some people don't."

When the hazard pay mandate first went into effect, there was an average of 300 cases per day in King County, where Seattle is located. Today, the daily average is around 550, down slightly from 700 two weeks ago. Washington state and King County dropped mask and vaccine requirements, quarantine recommendations for exposed individuals, and other basic mitigation measures that had been in place in the two years prior. A total of 1.76 million cases and 13,888 deaths have been reported in Washington state since the beginning of the pandemic.

In their announcement that hazard pay is ending, PCC added that their employees will no longer get COVID sick leave, so they must now use their own sick leave hours. Fred Meyer and other stores may follow suit, encouraged by new CDC guidelines that have dropped quarantine recommendations for infected individuals.

"I have a coworker who's in her 60s who now has Long COVID," said the PCC worker. "She has a recurring lung condition and brain fog. PCC has had her working a very inconsistent schedule, sometimes 7 days in a row which places a lot of stress on her."

"The managers don't care at all, you'll see them laughing. It's a joke. To them, it's a huge benefit. PCC is a co-op which means customers are members who get back dividends from the profits. They've been blaming lower dividends on the workers this whole time, saying it's because of the hazard pay increase. So now they get to send a newsletter announcing better profit margins."

"Many of the workers are leaving, others are waiting until the 30-day mark to get whatever else they can and then look for other jobs. That's what I'm doing." She added, "There's a lot of young people, even 20-year-olds, who are going into a panic now about how they're going to get by. They're worried about not being able to afford housing, wondering what's going to happen."

"But the store is run in a way that they don't care about keeping workers around, not even the workers who have a

lot of experience. They just grind people through the system until they burn out, and then hire even more, often young workers who aren't trained and don't know any better."

The desperation of grocery workers exposes the role of the UFCW, which acts as an arm of management. In April, UFCW 3000 ratified a contract for the vast majority of grocery workers in the region, encompassing Safeway, Albertsons, Fred Meyer, QFC, Metropolitan Market, Town & Country and other independent stores. The agreement includes meager increases of \$4 to \$9 per hour spread out over three years, which the union claimed was "historic."

For other stores which are not covered by the contract, such as PCC, the UFCW has done nothing. The PCC worker reported, "They sent a union rep to our store, mainly just to hear concerns and express empathy. But they haven't talked about doing anything to oppose it." PCC's contract expires next year, so the UFCW is focused on that.

As local publication *The Stranger* reported during the vote to end hazard pay last December, a UFCW spokesperson thanked the City Council for keeping hazard pay in place for so long and that now they will focus on "winning permanent wage increases for essential workers." Teresa Mosqueda said the temporary hazard pay ordinance "sparked a conversation" between employee and employer to facilitate those permanent wins.

Jonathan Bishofsky-Crews, a worker at the Ballard Trader Joe's, commented last year, "A conversation amongst labor does not pay my bills next month... I know a lot of people are living on a razor's edge right now and they're gonna fall between the cracks immediately." Trader Joe's is a nonunion store, which increased pay by \$4 nationwide but recently slashed retirement benefits.



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