

UFCW claims passage of contract in Fort Wayne, announces second agreement in Columbus, Ohio after one day of negotiations

Alex Findijs
21 August 2022

UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers) Local 700 announced late Friday night the passage of the new contract for Kroger workers in Fort Wayne, Indiana, by a margin of 72 percent.

The union has not provided any vote totals, but assuming the 72 percent margin is accurate, the UFCW pushed through this contract by withholding information and deliberately structuring the vote to suppress turnout. Workers were given only a few hours during a single day to vote at their stores on a contract that they were not allowed to see before voting. The union announced the tentative agreement (TA) a week before voting with a terse list of “highlights” that failed to list even basic information like wage increases.

A full contract is still not available online, but workers have reported that pay raises were only \$1 for most workers and just \$0.65 for department leads. With the current rate of inflation, this pay “rise” is actually a significant pay cut. By the end of the contract the typical pay for a Fort Wayne Kroger worker will be worth less than it is today.

Some workers have said that the contract is more or less the same as the one forced through in Indianapolis. If true, the contract will give small pay raises of \$0.50 in the second and third years, still woefully inadequate to the needs of workers.

Local 700 rammed through the contract in Indianapolis, the state’s capital and largest city, only after workers had voted to reject an initial TA. The union blocked strike action using an arbitrary rule in its bylaws requiring a two-thirds rejection of a contract before a strike can be called. The union held a vote on a second contract, which it then claimed had passed, to the anger of many workers who suspected ballot fraud.

In response to an outpouring of opposition on social media, Local 700 responded by deleting its entire Facebook page, which has not yet been restored.

Regardless of how the contract passed—low turnout, intimidation, fraud—the facts of the matter are that the union forced through the contract through what is becoming its typical tactics. The union gave workers in each store only one day to vote, with two voting sessions of between 1.5 to two hours long. Workers were not given access to the contract when it was announced, and physical copies were reportedly dropped off at stores only a couple of days before the vote. Prior to that, the union only released a bogus “highlights” package, which included no information.

Elsewhere, the UFCW announced a second tentative agreement for Kroger workers in Columbus, Ohio, who overwhelmingly rejected a contract late last month by 73 percent. That deal contained sub-inflation pay raises and a cynical reworking of the pay progression system that would have penalized workers for not working enough hours in a year at a company notorious for denying workers full-time status.

The union kept workers on the job in spite of the rejection and returned to the bargaining table with the company only on August 19. It quickly announced a new agreement the next day, just as Local 700 had done in Fort Wayne.

Voting is planned for August 25 and 26. On social media, many Columbus workers expressed their distrust of the contract and of the union for reaching a new deal so quickly. “In 1 day they got a new deal. Ohh I can’t wait to see it,” said one worker. “1st offer was 1.65 over 3 years. I’m betting they got .25 more ... Good luck 1059 members. I’m probably gonna vote no

again but we shall wait and see.”

Another said, “Definitely a no vote for me, if the 1st raise isn’t the \$2 we were getting during the pandemic that they took away, then gave the CEO [Rodney McMullen] a \$20 million bonus.” This refers to the extra \$2 per hour in “hero pay,” which the company had offered in the opening months of the pandemic and then ended.

“Don’t be surprised that [the] only thing changed was the verbiage or wording on the contract,” said another. “Money and extra days and bonus I bet are still the same. Read it over thoroughly.”

One worker objected, “They aren’t gonna tell you what the offer is. They want you to go vote in person so the union can talk you into voting yes. I SMELL SOME BULLS***! They are going to scare you! Strike strike strike and make the union pay you FULL WAGE!”

A conflict is brewing between grocery store workers, on the one hand, and Kroger management and the UFCW bureaucracy, on the other. While there is powerful opposition from Kroger workers, who want to reverse years of stagnating wages and win significant improvements to safety, staffing and working conditions, they confront a conspiracy of union officials with management to keep them on the job and force through substandard contracts which maintain their status as a highly exploited, low-wage workforce.

The way forward is through the mobilization of Kroger workers’ independent strength, organizing to challenge both the management and union sabotage. This means following the lead of Kroger workers in Indianapolis and building a network of rank-and-file committees, uniting Kroger workers across the country in a common struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact