

UFCW's message to Columbus Kroger workers following rejection of second sellout deal: "Continue to work"

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28 August 2022

Kroger workers in Columbus, Ohio have once again rejected a sellout contract endorsed by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union. In voting last Thursday and Friday, in spite of attempts by the union to suppress the vote, workers voted down the deal, virtually identical to the first one they rejected in July, demonstrating their resolve to reject substandard contracts and fight for adequate wages and working conditions.

Although turnout was lower than the first vote last month, workers rejected the virtually identical contract by a virtually identical margin. In the first vote, 874 voted "yes" and 2,128 voted "no." This time, 672 voted "yes" and 1,722 voted "no." The low turnout may be explained by the difficult voting times and sessions, which were held at various hotels around the Columbus area instead of in each store.

Under the new deal, wage increases would have still been below a dollar a year, as little as \$0.35 a year for some workers. As with the first deal, the basic wage increases would only be \$0.65/\$0.50/\$0.50 in each year of the contract, except that department leads would no longer receive a signing bonus and would instead get an extra \$0.35 in September of 2023. The contract also kept a proposed new wage progression system, which would have required workers to average 34 hours a week over an entire year to qualify for Scale Two and 36 hours for the top scale, leaving them at the mercy of the company's scheduling.

"The only change in the contract is the color of the ink," one Kroger worker told the WSWS. "It's not a fair contract, it's not fair across the board, it's not all inclusive. Kroger made record-breaking profits during the pandemic, we took the risks, and we get no reward.

This contract proves it, it is a slap in the face."

Another worker said, "I voted NO. It's ridiculous the way Kroger is treating us employees after all the money we made them. They should be ashamed." A third added, "It's a joke. It's just the same thing with the bonus for the leads taken away. I hope for a strike at this point. We deserve to be paid a fair wage. In my store you can go across the street to White Castle and make more money. I voted no today!"

Workers were no doubt emboldened to press for what they deserve by the rising tide of opposition in the working class generally, including in the Columbus area in particular. Last week, Columbus teachers struck for three days to demand adequate resources for public education. However, as with UFCW Local 1059, the Columbus Education Association worked to sabotage workers' strength, shutting down the strike after only a few days. This was justified on the basis that a "conceptual agreement"—that is, not an actual contract—had been reached in the dead of night Thursday morning, after marathon talks insisted upon by a Biden-appointed federal mediator.

The UFCW, clearly taken aback by the result, issued a terse statement which nevertheless managed in a few words to clearly express the contempt the bureaucracy feels for workers: "Thank you to all the members who came out to vote. We have informed the Company of the results. Continue to work."

"Continue to work" may as well be the motto of the UFCW, which functions more and more openly as agents of management from one contract to the next. In Indianapolis, UFCW Local 700 responded to the rejection of a tentative agreement by forcing workers to vote again on a similar deal. When they claimed the

contract was ratified, outraged workers took to Facebook to express their skepticism at the result. Local 700 responded by deleting its entire Facebook page.

This was followed by another contract in Fort Wayne, Indiana, which, as with Columbus, was supposedly reached after one day of negotiations. Workers were initially given “highlights” consisting entirely of vague assertions, before the union eventually dropped off copies of the deal only a few days before the vote. The speed with which both the Fort Wayne and Columbus contracts were reached suggests that the union had simply accepted management’s initial proposal with only minimal adjustment.

Now that they have voted down a second contract, Columbus Kroger workers are demanding strike action. One summed up the mood: “Many of us can’t afford to strike, but at the same time I feel we need to so Kroger will step up their game. Fast food restaurants shouldn’t be paying more than Kroger.”

But workers believe that the union will simply try to extend the contract further and continue to revote on the same contract, which Local 1059 President Randy Quickel had called the “best contract east of the Mississippi.”

The UFCW is a vast business unto itself. According to financial reports with the Department of Labor, the national headquarters alone controls over \$436 million in assets, including \$299 million in “investments,” mostly stocks and other financial assets. This gives it a direct economic stake in exploiting the workers that it claims to represent. Indeed, during 2021, it disbursed only \$808,829 in strike pay.

Local 1059 is a major franchise in this business. It had nearly \$13 million in assets in 2019, almost \$4.7 million of which was in “investments.” The local’s total assets have quadrupled from \$2.5 million in 2008. Such vast sums of money fund the exorbitant salaries of its bloated staff, led by President Randy Quickel who made \$222,350 in 2019, and Secretary-Treasurer Paul Smithberger who made \$203,650. This is roughly six times the annual wages of an average grocery store worker and significantly more than even the average grocery store manager.

In order to fight for an adequate contract, Kroger workers need the means to organize themselves against both Kroger and the UFCW bureaucracy. This means

the building of the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which fights for the independent mobilization of Kroger workers. The committee was the only organized group campaigning from the start against the sellout not only at Columbus, but in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. For more information, fill out the form below:



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