

Columbus Kroger workers: Prepare now to defeat UFCW's next sellout deal

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Workers at Kroger stores in the Columbus, Ohio, area, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1059, rejected a second contract between the union and Kroger management on August 26. The union has said it resumed negotiations with Kroger, and workers will vote for a third time when the union reaches a new tentative agreement.

According to workers who have posted comments on the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Forum—a Facebook group independent of the union bureaucracy founded in response to UFCW Local 700's deletion of its own Facebook page, UFCW Local 1059 is sending a survey to its members ahead of the announcement of the next vote to supposedly address workers' concerns.

The survey asks four questions. First, if the worker voted on any of the tentative agreements, which ones did he or she vote on? Second, what was the worker's preference? Either to not change voting places and schedules, to have contract voting at each store, to expand the contract voting hours beyond the 7:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m. time blocks, or to add another city to contract voting locations.

Third, if the worker believes that “some provisions need more focus in negotiations than others,” which one would he or she choose? All provisions being equally important, wages, health insurance, pre-Medicare retiree insurance, or “other” in which the worker can write in a response. Finally, there is a comment box where the worker can write any other comments or suggestions at the end of the survey.

The survey is an attempt by the UFCW to add a few cosmetic changes to the two previously rejected deals with the aim of duping workers into accepting another management-friendly contract. It excludes any options for workers to oppose chronic understaffing or to demand the transition of part-time workers into full-timers, or address questions of hours and time off. All of this is of great

concern to workers, in addition to wages and health care benefits.

Very significant is the survey's total avoidance of any question of a strike. Some workers assumed a second “no” vote would mean that Local 1059 would conduct a strike vote. As workers have found out, this was not the case. There is widespread support for a strike despite difficult financial situations many workers confront.

Rather than hold a strike vote, the UFCW bureaucracy continues to extend the contract to ensure that Kroger continues to reap the profits of workers' labor over the Labor Day holiday weekend and beyond.

In its last message to Columbus Kroger workers who voted down the contract on August 26, the UFCW bureaucracy insisted workers continue to work even though workers will rebuke another sellout contract. “Thank you to all the members who came out to vote. We have informed the Company of the results. Continue to work,” the message said contemptuously.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained after workers rejected the second proposal, “‘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.”

With each and every contract extension and rejection of rank-and-file workers' demands, from California to Texas to Indianapolis to Fort Wayne to Columbus, the UFCW exposes itself as a tool of corporate management. The UFCW is thoroughly opposed to mobilizing the collective power of workers in a national strike against the grocery giant. That is because it wants to preserve its lucrative corporate partnership with Kroger. It functions as a cheap labor contractor that protects company profits by preventing strikes or isolating them when they have no choice but to call them in the face of mounting rank-and-file pressure, as they did to Colorado King Soopers workers in the spring of this year.

Local union officials are paid well to prevent workers from organizing to fight back against contracts that keep wages low and benefits limited. UFCW Local 1059 President Randy Quickel made \$222,350 in 2019 and Secretary-Treasurer Paul Smithberger made \$203,650—roughly six times the annual wages of an average Kroger store worker.

The UFCW itself controls \$436 million in assets, including \$299 million in “investments,” mostly stocks and other financial assets. In contrast, the union only disbursed \$808,829 in strike pay in 2021. The bureaucracy has a direct economic interest in assisting management in exploiting the workers it claims to represent.

An August 30 post by an anonymous user in a private Kroger employees Facebook group attempted to dissuade workers in Columbus from voting down the contract based on its substitution of a signing bonus for some workers for an increase in hourly wages. It concluded by stating, “I promise you, you *don’t* want to strike. You might think you do. You really, really don’t.”

Workers denounced the poster’s attempt to intimidate them. A worker from Michigan wrote to refute the lie that workers would get more money if they approved the contract and took the bonus as bait. “Those bonuses from the company are taxed to all hell, you will be lucky to get \$1,200, [but] that \$1 per hour stays forever and overtime adds up, not to mention any overtime included over your years with that said raise. Going for bonuses are dumb, it’s 1 payment that is taxed like crazy over the course of years. With a raise you will net more at the end of the line.”

Another worker from Las Vegas encouraged Columbus workers to strike: “In Las Vegas we only got a dollar and \$650 bonus. I say STRIKE STRIKE STRIKE or you will get nothing you deserve.”

Local 1059 workers are skeptical that the union will bring back anything substantially different from the two previous contracts they rejected. They are right.

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages rank-and-file Kroger workers to connect with each other on social media, through group chats and other secure methods of communication to organize a “NO” vote if the next deal does not meet all of their demands.

Workers can discuss their answers to the UFCW survey and decide among themselves, democratically, what kinds of demands they want to put forward. Workers know the corporation has made billions of dollars since the pandemic began with the help of the UFCW. The union

compelled workers to stay on the job with minimal protections and has extended every contract over the past three months.

Kroger has made enough money to announce stock buybacks for its wealthy investors. At the same time, the UFCW has agreed to pathetic raises of less than \$1 per hour for the majority of workers in the region, while inflation hovers at about 8.5 percent officially. There is plenty of money for workers to demand everything they need to recoup wage losses over the past several contract periods and raise wages above the rate of inflation. This must be combined with fully-paid health care benefits and giving all part-time employees full-time work if they want it, thus eliminating the burden of overworking those workers who are forced into overtime to make up for short staffing.

To fight back, workers must understand that their economic demands are part of a broader political fight, as United Auto Workers presidential candidate Will Lehman explained to workers across the US in a historic tour this summer. A fightback for Kroger workers against the corporation means first and foremost taking the steps to break the grip of the UFCW apparatus and mobilize workers across regional and even national boundaries.

For Kroger workers to unite their power along with the rest of the working class, they must form rank-and-file committees in every store to organize slowdowns and walkouts and other forms of collective action.

For workers who want to take a stand to organize a committee at your store, contact the WSWS to learn more, and join the Kroger Workers’ Rank-and-File Forum to add your voice to the struggle and connect with other rank-and-file Kroger workers across the country.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact