

UFCW tells Kroger workers to vote on same contract for fourth time

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Kroger workers in the Columbus, Ohio area are outraged that officials from the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1059 ignored their strike authorization and are forcing them to vote on the same contract they have voted down three times. Contract “negotiations” between the union and company have yielded a pro-company contract, which cuts real wages and imposes a regressive pay scale system that allows the company to cut pay by slashing hours.

UFCW 1059 repeatedly claims these contracts are the best Kroger can offer. This is a blatant lie. Kroger made \$4 billion in profits in each of the last two years while workers were denied hazard pay during a pandemic that killed thousands of retail workers.

The union’s negotiating committee has “unanimously” endorsed these sellout deals, demonstrating that it is nothing but a tool of corporate management. This only underscores the need for rank-and-file workers to demand the removal of the bargaining committee and the setting up of a committee made up of the most militant and class-conscious workers. The conduct of this struggle can no longer be left in the hands of UFCW bureaucrats like Local 1059 President Randy Quickel, who makes more than \$222,000 a year.

Instead of the closed-door conspiracy between Kroger and the UFCW, all negotiations must be live-streamed so that workers are fully informed and can press for their own set of demands.

In service to their corporate handlers, the UFCW tells workers what a “good deal” it is. If the membership has the audacity to reject a contract, it simply tells them to try again, and again, and again, until they get it right. This is what UFCW 700 did in Indianapolis this summer. Workers voted on the same contract three times before the union got the result it wanted.

The growing worker rebellion against the UFCW bureaucracy is sparking fear in the union leadership. Workers have reported that they are now receiving texts from the union attempting to promote the contract. One worker shared their text on social media, in which the UFCW informed them that they would receive just a one-dollar raise for a total of \$15.25 an hour.

They responded, “A dollar? You guys are f.....g hilarious.”

Another noted that their offered pay raise was the same in each iteration of the contract. They added that “My proposed Step 1 wage has been the same across all four iterations of the contract. The only changes made were an additional 20 CENTS TOTAL between Step 2 and Step 3 in 2024. I will never see these rates because I’m part time and not given the hours needed to reach the average requirement to rise up in Step. Most of us are in this position.”

Most workers will only see a one-dollar raise this year. That paltry sum will not be added until 2024, when most workers will get just another 65 cents. The union is also dangling a \$2,500 bonus in front of workers. However, the bonus only goes to workers who are already at top pay and full time. This is on top of the fact that the bonus will be heavily taxed, making it worth only a few cents an hour through the life of the contract.

The new pay scale system is also designed to flush out experienced workers and lock employees into the lower pay scales by reducing hours. In prior contracts, Kroger workers received raises based on the number of total hours they have worked, gaining additional base pay with experience. However, this new model reduces the pay scale to just three tiers.

The lowest tier offers insignificant pay raises over the life of the contract, from \$14.25 to \$14.95, while those

in the third tier can be bumped down to tier two if they fail to work an average of 36 hours a week over the course of a year-long period. This means that workers can have their pay cut if they must take time off for medical leave or to care for family. Kroger may also simply cut hours for workers at will with the aim of reducing pay. Kroger stores around the country have gone through rapid transitions to hire more part-time employees and push out senior workers.

Top pay for a clerk will cap out at \$17.40 an hour. But many workers may never even reach that wholly inadequate rate. They must first reach tier three, which is not guaranteed, and that top rate only goes into effect in February 2025, just months away from the expiration of the contract.

Other unwritten details of the contract were reported by a worker. Reportedly, if the contract fails, the membership will have to authorize a strike again with a 67 percent threshold and the company must be given 10 days notice of a strike.

Most significantly, there allegedly will be no back pay for workers who have been dragged through the mud for months as the union colludes with management to cut real wages.

Everything about the way that the UFCW has handled the contract negotiations is rotten. Workers were kept in the dark about contract details, they were told to travel to distant locations to vote, and they have been forced to vote on the same contract over and over again.

Workers are rightfully angry with their union leadership. But it is not just the case of a few bad apples in charge. It is the very character of the union apparatus that moves it to betray workers and collaborate with the company.

The UFCW abandoned the interests of its members decades ago. In the 1980s, it colluded with meatpacking firms like Hormel to smash strikes, going so far as putting militant locals under trusteeship and removing their elected leaders. In the grocery industry, the UFCW worked with management to reduce what were once relatively good-paying and secure jobs into low-paying, part-time jobs.

Throughout this period, the UFCW was transformed into a cheap labor contractor, which takes member dues and funnels it into the high salaries of its top officials and their relatives. The UFCW has at least \$400 million

in financial investments, yet offers little to nothing for strike pay. UFCW International President Anthony Perrone makes \$308,548 in 2021 while rank-and-file members can hardly afford to shop at the store they work in.

The resistance of Kroger workers is part of a growing rebellion against the corporatist unions. Over 100,000 railroad workers are battling their unions, which have colluded with management and the Biden administration to block strike action and impose pro-company contracts. Electricians on the railroad have accused the IBEW of passing a contract through fraud, with many never even receiving a mail-in ballot to vote.

Workers have a right to organize and fight for what they deserve. They do not need traitorous bureaucrats to sell them out to the bosses. The apparatus must be abolished and the rank and file put in charge of negotiations and ballot counts.

Rail workers have formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight for worker control. Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman is running for United Auto Workers president on the platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and transferring power to workers on the shop floor.

Kroger workers in Columbus and around the country are encouraged to join them in this movement. All workers who wish to take up the fight for better pay and quality of life should contact the WSWS for help in building the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee, a new organization by and for workers that will fight for workers demands, not cave to company dictates.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact