Columbus Kroger workers speak out after union contract betrayal

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Kroger workers in Columbus, Ohio are outraged following the ramming through a sellout contract by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1059. The union claims it passed the contract last week, after forcing workers to vote on the same deal four times in two months. In earlier votes, workers had already rejected the contract, which offered just $1.60 in raises over two years, by significant margins and authorized a strike by 89 percent.

Despite the clear mandate by workers to carry out a strike, the union returned with the same contract and tried to threaten workers into voting "yes."

One worker told the WSWS that a union representative tried to scare workers by claiming a strike could last "20 to 30 weeks." Another said they were told by the union that "'If you go on strike you WILL lose your job'—not could but will—'If you vote no you won't get paid, if you vote yes you will'."

Outrage over the union's actions has even motivated workers to call for complaints to be filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), on the grounds that the UFCW had not bargained in good faith. One worker wrote on social media: "I feel that the texts touting their work and lack of any push-back to Kroger's claims is not negotiating in good faith. Their job is to stand up for the workers, and they failed to do it. That kept encouraging us to vote on contracts that would see us actually make less money over the long term.

"We were set back by what the union clearly pushed us to accept. The union allowed us to be and actively coerced us to accept a contract that pushes us to an even lower economic class."

This sentiment is widespread. One worker reported that they were told by a union representative that they would "be out on the street" if they voted against the contract. Another told the WSWS "I noticed on the paper ballot under the 2 boxes text to the effect of that [voting no raised the possibility of a strike.] I think it was a last ditch effort to thwart the vote. Nothing should have been on the official ballot except 2 boxes. Shouldn't there be an investigation??"

Another reported that ballots at their store reversed the voting options, making it so that marking the "yes" box actually meant to actually reject the contract and a marking 'no' meant to accept it. If confirmed, this would be a blatant attempt at ballot fraud.

"Kroger is giving upper management outrageous bonuses while the hourly workers REALLY run the store," said one worker. "They gave us 'hero pay,' a $2 boost in pay at the beginning of COVID, but that lasted for a very short time, and then Kroger took it away. They should have left it alone.

"It's very clear how they feel about their hourly workers, especially the senior staff who have been there 8 years or more, because they don't care and we're not worthy of their respect. Kroger keeps their employees in poverty. Sometimes I can't afford my prescriptions.

"The 4-times reworded contract offering does not even reflect the current market. Not even a cost of living increase—food, gas and utilities prices and everything else is going up too."

"I've been with this company for over 15 years," said another, "and for this so called 65 cents is literally like a big f*** you for being with this wack ass company that claims to be the best place to work."

Others have pointed out the rate of inflation and the failure of the contract to keep up with rising prices. "I am currently spending less at my store than in the past," one worker said. "The price of chicken wings for instance went from $7.99 a 2.5 pound bag 'everyday low price' to $13.99 a bag in one year! Boxed frozen

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hamburger went from $8.99 ‘everyday low price’ to $13.49 in one year. These are just a couple of examples.”

They added that, “The new contract does not have a raise built in for the entire 2023 year. We will go 14 months without a raise. I don’t see the prices staying the same that entire time. They will only go up.”

Across the life of the contract, a worker currently making around $16 an hour will see just a 10 percent raise over three years. With the inflation rate currently over eight percent a year, the adjusted wage is really a pay cut.

According to the Forbes inflation calculator, a top wage of $17.40 an hour for most workers will be worth just $13.71 in today’s money by 2025 at the present inflation rate. In order to just keep up with inflation, a wage of $17.40 today would have to be $22 an hour to break even.

The fact that the union promoted a contract that included a real wage cut, and rejected the clear demands of the rank-and-file to demand better wage increases, is a clear indication that the union is not representing workers but serving on behalf of the company.

Kroger workers must take matters into their own hands. The union not only refuses to fight for them, but actively works on the behalf of the company to cut living and working conditions. This means building the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee to challenge the results of the vote and organize workers to fight against similar betrayals in the next contract.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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