

UFCW calls off strike of 3,000 Cub Foods grocery workers in Minnesota with “last-minute” tentative agreement

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Hours before a strike by 3,000 Cub Foods grocery store workers in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, was scheduled to begin Friday morning, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 663 announced a tentative agreement, calling off the walkout before the busy Easter holiday weekend. The UFCW had previously scheduled a limited two-day strike at 33 Cub Foods grocery stores in the state for Friday and Saturday, following a vote by workers in overwhelmingly in favor of strike action earlier in the week.

While the UFCW trumpeted the deal, dubbing it “historic,” initial details already make clear that it would fail to meet workers’ demands for massive wage increases to offset the cost-of-living crisis, nor provide serious protections from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wages would increase just \$2.50 to \$3.50 an hour by the spring of 2024, according to UFCW’s press release, a significant climbdown from the union’s earlier \$4 hourly increase over the next two years.

It is not clear, based on the limited details of deal agreement the UFCW has released, what starting wages would be under the tentative agreement. But part-time workers currently start at as low as \$12 an hour, and under an earlier UFCW proposal, that would have only gone up to \$13.75, a completely inadequate poverty wage.

For a part-time worker making \$12, a raise of \$3.50 to \$15.50 would still only barely surpass Minneapolis’ minimum wage, which currently stands at \$15.19. For higher-seniority full-time workers, it is almost certain

that the wage increases will fail to keep up with inflation, which currently averages more than 6 percent annually.

In addition, the UFCW has stated the deal would establish a “landmark safety committee.” But such joint union-management safety committees have completely failed to keep workers safe in other industries where they exist, including the automotive, healthcare, and other sectors.

The UFCW has nonetheless declared the deal a “comprehensive victory.”

“The bargaining committee believes that this tentative agreement respects, protects, and pays our members fairly,” UFCW Local 663 President Rena Wong said.

Revealingly, Cub Foods has also hailed the deal, claiming in similar language that it contained “historic wage increases and continued comprehensive health and welfare and retirement benefits as requested by the union.”

“We care greatly for our Cub team members and are pleased that our stores will be open and ready to serve our customers and communities throughout the holiday weekend.”

Workers, however, have already begun to respond skeptically to the declarations by both the UFCW and management. “Well tell us about the new contract,” one worker wrote in response to the UFCW’s announcement on Facebook. “What did we lose and what do we still have? Some of us have to work and don’t drive so we can’t make it to this meeting [on the contract]. If this is a serious loss of something please let me know. We deserve that. Do we still have a pension and health care? Did we lose our vacation time?”

Workers fighting for better pay, benefits as well as safer working conditions can win their demands, but no trust can be placed in the UFCW leadership, which has routinely sold out the struggles of grocery workers across the country.

Workers should demand the release of the entire contract, not limited “highlights,” and at least a full week to study it. Moreover, in order to formulate and fight for demands based on what workers actually need, workers should establish rank-and-file committees to take control of their struggle.

The earlier 94.5 percent strike vote by Cub Foods workers is an expression of growing anger and frustration among grocery workers around the country and the world. For three years, grocery workers have been deemed “essential” and kept on the job from one surge to the next, with minimal protection and equipment and little to no hazard pay.

Notably, the strike had only been called for 33 out of the 79 Cub Foods stores in the state of Minnesota. The UFCW tries to justify keeping the other 46 locations at work by claiming that they have “good” contracts with franchisees. Local 663 has 17,000 members overall in Minnesota and Iowa, including at other supermarket chains such as Lunds & Byerlys and Kowalski’s Markets, who are also working under expired or soon-to-expire contracts.

The UFCW has worked to ram through concessions on grocery workers around the country in recent years. In early 2022, UFCW Local 7 shut down a strike by King Soopers grocery workers in the Denver, Colorado, area and rammed through a sellout deal. Last July, UFCW Local 700 claimed that a concessions contract was ratified for 8,000 Kroger grocery retail workers in Indiana. The contract was passed before half of eligible members could vote—and remarkably, the leadership deleted the local’s Facebook page in the face of massive opposition from rank-and-file workers, who widely suspected ballot fraud.

Last October, UFCW Local 1059 forced through a contract on Kroger workers in the Columbus, Ohio, area after making them vote on the same sellout contract four times. Like the contract in Indiana, workers were kept in the dark about the contract and only provided “highlights.” Local 1059 had ignored their strike vote and reached a deal with Kroger and claimed that the contract was the best the company

could offer.

Workers should reject any claims that Cub Foods cannot afford raises with contempt. United Natural Foods, Inc. (UNFI), Cub Foods’ parent, reported a 66 percent increase in net income last year, rising to \$248 million, on revenues of \$28.9 billion. In July 2018, SUPERVALU, Cub Foods’ previous parent company, was acquired by UNFI for \$2.9 billion.

On the UFCW Local 663 Facebook page, workers had earlier expressed frustration with Cub Foods as well as the union leadership. One worker wrote in response to the announcement of the one day strike, “As a part-timer that’s been with company 27 1/2 years I don’t feel appreciated.”

Another commenter criticized the UFCW strategy of isolating 33 Cub Foods stores from the other 46 in the state: “It probably wouldn’t have reached this point if your union leadership insisted on all the franchises being included in the same contract. If you work for a Cub it should be the same pay and benefits regardless if it’s a franchise or not. Letting the franchise Cubs settle their contracts before yours destroyed your bargaining power.”

Another worker expressed frustration with the lack of planning for the two-day strike and silence from union leadership: “I work overnights (24 hr Cub), so I don’t know how this going to work as to “strike” at my store. I was told to not show up, but there has been a lot of miscommunication that I don’t understand. I emailed my union rep early this morning, got a reply 30 minutes later telling me there’s going to be more information about later in the morning, but I still got nothing. I feel like no one is helping me in this dire situation I’m in.”



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