

Strike by 2,500 grocery workers at Minnesota Lunds & Byerlys called off as UFCW and company announce tentative agreement

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A few days after Minnesota grocery workers at Lunds & Byerlys (L&B) announced their intention to strike against the grocery giant, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union reached a tentative agreement, calling off the strike set for the upcoming holiday weekend.

Over the previous week, 2,500 L&B grocery workers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike due to concerns regarding working conditions, wages, and healthcare benefits. Among these, healthcare benefits has emerged as the most significant issue. The tentative agreement was quickly reached during the bargaining session on Monday night following the strike announcement.

L&B grocery workers should take this as a warning that the company and the UFCW are seeking to ram through a deal as soon as possible to avoid a strike—even as the grocery workers stand in a powerful position to secure their demands and unite with other sections of grocery and food industry workers across the city and country.

Workers must form committees of rank-and-file workers to carry forward their struggle and secure their demands. Lunds Food Holdings Inc., the parent company of L&B, experienced its peak revenue amidst the ongoing pandemic last year, taking in over \$500 million. The company is seeing growth and attempting to maximize profits by squeezing workers' wages and benefits.

UFCW Local 663 has been negotiating with Minnesota-based L&B, a grocery chain, since early this

year and workers have been without a contract since March 7. In March, UFCW Local 663 published a letter on its website expressing concerns about L&B's demand to switch to healthcare plans provided by United Health Group. However, L&B did not disclose any details about the quality of coverage or costs ahead of the negotiations.

This lack of information justifies grocery workers approaching this move skeptically and demanding full details. Workers suspect that the offered benefits may be of lower quality than the Minneapolis Retail Meat Cutters and Food Handlers Health & Welfare Fund, as workers' healthcare has been under assault in virtually every sector for the past decades.

Despite the announcement of the tentative agreement, specific details regarding the workers desired improvements have yet to be provided up front by the UFCW. Workers were rightfully upset with the grocery giant, with one worker denouncing the company's conduct on Facebook, stating, "Tres Lund (CEO of L&B) only cares about one thing, and that is the loss of REVENUE! And that is exactly what this strike on a busy holiday weekend would have done.

"Three years a global pandemic and beyond, this company has done ABUNDANTLY WELL! What Tres Lund fails to grasp is that it is the underpaid hands of thousands that did that!"

Furthermore, the contract announcement fails to acknowledge the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers, presenting it solely in the past tense.

Considering these circumstances, workers should demand a comprehensive release of the tentative agreement and ample time to review the contract before

voting. L&B workers must establish rank-and-file committees immediately to safeguard against betrayals by the UFCW leadership. These committees should discuss and set minimum demands for healthcare coverage and wages that meet or exceed workers' basic needs. A contract vote should only occur if workers have sufficient time to study the contract and ensure it meets their demands.

Earlier this year, Cub Foods employees in Minnesota also voted to strike. However, a last-minute tentative agreement was announced just hours before the strike was set to begin. The deal included meager wage increases of \$2.50 to \$3.50 over the next year, significantly less than the previous \$4 raise. It did not address the issue of healthcare coverage, despite soaring inflation. Although the UFCW hailed the creation of a "landmark safety committee" as part of the agreement, these joint company-union committees have consistently failed to protect workers across various industries, in fact the opposite.

Workers should critically assess such last-minute agreements, particularly considering the Cub Foods and L&B deals. Cub Foods warmly embraced the agreement, dubbing certain aspects "historic." Similarly, L&B praised the last minute contract deal, claiming it offers "industry-leading wages and an improved healthcare plan for our team members."

The UFCW has a history of betraying grocery workers. Early last year, UFCW Local 7 ended a strike involving 8,000 workers against King Soopers in Denver, Colorado, part of Kroger, the nation's largest grocery chain. The workers had sought to counter the company's demands for two-tier wages and inadequate pay. The strike led to a sales reduction of up to 90 percent for the chain. Still, the UFCW terminated the strike and accepted a deal that included the company's main concessions.

The UFCW executed a similar maneuver last July in Indiana. The local UFCW leadership claimed ratification of a concessions contract for 8,000 Kroger grocery retail workers, despite less than half of the members being able to vote. Remarkably, the leadership deleted the local's Facebook page in response to massive opposition from rank-and-file workers who strongly suspected ballot fraud.

In some initial communications with L&B in this year's negotiations, the UFCW suggested collusion

among grocery giants like Cub, Kowalski's, and L&B, but did not attempt to unite workers against these companies. It instead sought to isolate the different groups of workers, allowing the corporations to extract concessions and prevent a united opposition.

The strike vote by L&B workers is the first at the company. It is a further manifestation of a growing wave of resistance among workers against oppressive conditions, the ongoing pandemic, and the United States escalating military provocations against Russia and China.

Coinciding with this strike, UPS logistics workers are also facing massive wage cuts and the imposition of new wage tiers for all workers. UPS workers have overwhelmingly voted to strike in opposition to these demands and have rejected the Teamsters' contracts. Across the United States and the world, workers everywhere are fighting back to improve their lives.

L&B workers can win this fight, but this can only happen if they take the struggle out of the union's grip and establish secure control over the contract negotiations by forming rank-and-file committees.



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