

Hormel workers in Austin, Minnesota—site of bitter 1985-1986 strike—overwhelmingly reject contract

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Work in the meatpacking industry? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us what your working conditions are like and what you are fighting for.

Workers in Austin, Minnesota, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 663, have overwhelmingly voted to reject a four-year contract proposal from Hormel Foods Corp.

This is a struggle of great historical significance. The same Hormel plant was the site of one of the most crushing defeats suffered by the working class in the 1980s, when the UFCW joined hands with the corporation and the state to defeat a bitter struggle by what was then Local P-9 in 1985 and 1986.

The present contract vote took place Friday, September 15, after two months of negotiations. Workers are pushing for better pay, pensions and insurance coverage, among other issues. The union's most recent offer to Hormel involved wage increases of \$6.25 by September 2025. Hormel offered a provocatively low raise of \$2.15 over the next four years. The union's demand, though much larger than the corporation's offer, would not even offset the erosion of workers' pay caused by inflation in recent years.

Rather than channeling the rejection of the contract into a strike, the UFCW, which has over 1,700 members in its Austin local, has told workers to stay on the job through October 8.

Members of Local 663 have been compelled to continue to labor uninterrupted during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as food processing workers have been declared "essential workers."

"Our members have literally worked throughout the

pandemic, and sacrificed and gotten sick," UFCW Local 663 President Rena Wong stated to the *Star Tribune* newspaper, tacitly acknowledging the union's role in carrying on production in spite of the deadly risks to workers. Referring to a recent COVID-19 death at the Hormel plant, Wong said, "We want that sacrifice to be respected."

The stand of Hormel workers is part of a wave of militant and determined opposition in the working class against decades of wage stagnation. It comes in the face of a new offensive by big corporations and the banks to lower wages further. Workers across several industries and trades are fighting back against these conditions.

Over 150,000 autoworkers, determined to reverse decades of attacks on wages, benefits and working conditions, are demanding a nationwide strike against the Big Three automakers. They are facing not only the auto giants but a complicit union bureaucracy in the UAW, which has only sent a few plants out on strike while keeping 95 percent of the workers on the job—nearly the same percentage of workers who voted to strike. This is part of a strategy to break through rank-and-file opposition and force the company demands on autoworkers.

Hormel workers face the same company-union collusion. Just months ago, the UFCW sent Lunds grocery chain workers back with a substandard contract across Minnesota. In early 2022, UFCW Local 7 shut down a strike by King Soopers grocery workers in Denver, Colorado, and rammed through a sellout deal. In July 2022, UFCW Local 700 claimed that a sellout contract was ratified for 8,000 Kroger grocery retail workers in Indiana. The result was that the contract was passed before half of eligible members could vote on it.

Following this, the leadership deleted the local's Facebook page as massive opposition and angry comments, widely suspicious of ballot fraud, poured in.

Hormel workers, like all workers in meatpacking, face brutal conditions. Illness, injury and extreme exploitation plague the industry.

A recent report from the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration found that an average of 27 packing industry workers per day suffer amputation or hospitalization, according to only partial data from 29 US states between 2015 and 2022. These conditions are coupled with a high death rate. According to data from the AFL-CIO, over 5,000 meatpacking workers were killed on the job in 2021 alone—a self-damning statistic for the unions which were formed to fight these very same conditions in the age of the Robber Barons.

And those deaths and injuries, daily reality for meatpacking workers, occurred amidst the ongoing pandemic, which has added its own toll of debilitation and death among these “essential workers.”

The conditions faced by meatpacking workers today can be traced directly back to the Hormel strike of 1985-86, where the UFCW bureaucracy openly sabotaged the efforts of the Austin workers to resist the corporation's demands for their impoverishment.

The Hormel strike was one of a series of struggles, following the PATCO and Phelps Dodge strikes of 1981 and 1983-1984, respectively, in which the trade union apparatus actively collaborated with American capitalism to destroy militant workers. The UFCW, the politicians and the corporation sought to make an example of P-9 to cow the whole working class. Hormel workers and their supporters were subjected to mass arrests. The Democratic Party governor of Minnesota at the time, Rudy Perpich, called in the National Guard to escort scabs through picket lines. The UFCW went so far as to revoke P-9's charter and replace it with a scab local.

The defeat of the Hormel workers in 1986 cleared the decks for a brutal counteroffensive against all the gains workers had made in a century of struggle, dating back to before Upton Sinclair's famous exposé of the industry, *The Jungle*.

The success of the workers in the struggle against Hormel depends very much on assimilating the lessons of the 1985-1986 defeat. In spite of the efforts of

militant workers then, the union bureaucracy was able to isolate the struggle. The union officials were assisted by the petty-bourgeois radical left from the Twin Cities which attempted to steer the struggle toward middle class protest tactics and appeals to the Democratic Party.

Conditions have changed much since then, in the workers' favor. There are many signs that the American and international working class is moving into struggle. But it is still necessary for workers to take matters into their own hands. They must break out of the trade union straitjacket and make connections to build solidarity within and across industries and borders.

Hormel workers must form a rank-and-file committee independent of the UFCW, so that the conduct of the struggle can be taken out of the hands of the complacent bureaucracy and placed under the direct control of the workers.



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