

14,000 Houston Kroger workers authorize strike

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Work at Kroger? Tell us what your conditions are like and what you want to see in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Houston area Kroger workers voted last month to authorize strike action when their current contract expires February 24. More than 13,000 Kroger workers in the region who are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union could take strike action.

In a contract negotiation update following the strike authorization, UFCW Local 455 said it had met with the company on January 23 and 26. According to the union the company has not agreed upon any of the bargaining committee's demands.

On the union's website page outlining its demands is a list of vague points, including "contract raises and bonuses for all workers" and an "affordable plan design" with no cuts to healthcare. The list does not detail what the bargaining committee is fighting for in terms of wage increases or what it would consider an acceptable offer from the company. The union and the company will meet again on February 6, 7 and 8.

The current contract was implemented in 2022 but is effective back to 2020, after the union and company drew out negotiations for two years, with the UFCW ignoring two separate strike votes.

That contract raised top rate for full-time workers to just \$17.50 and only \$14.50 for part-time workers. But this only applies to those who are able to make it through the new step progression system implemented by Kroger and in other major contracts over the past few years.

Under this new system, workers do not gain seniority through the number of years or total hours worked, but through a system based on the average number of weekly hours worked in the past year. Starting at just

\$13 an hour, workers can gain an extra 50 cents each year by qualifying for each step. Step 2 requires an average of 32 hours a week, Step 3 requires 34 hours and Steps 4 and 5 require 38 hours. If a worker averages fewer than the required hours, the company can downgrade a worker to a lower step where they will have to wait another year to attempt to qualify again.

Healthcare was also left out of the contract, with the union and the company agreeing to draft language for the healthcare section after the contract was ratified. This left workers out of the loop when the union agreed to increase the number of hours required to qualify for healthcare coverage from 20 to 27 per week.

These are major concessions to the company that allows Kroger, which nets more than \$4 billion in profit a year, to cut labor costs by reducing hours for workers, creating a caste of part-time employees who are ineligible for healthcare benefits and top-rate pay. The contract also increased the daily threshold to qualify for overtime from eight hours to eight and a half hours, allowing the company to keep employees on the job longer without needing to pay any overtime.

Acknowledging that the contract was concessionary, while washing his hands of the union's own responsibility, UFCW Local 455 president Brandon Hopkins told Houston Public Media that Kroger "took advantage of our members in my view and put them through hell. They took too much last time, and our members are having trouble making ends meet. We have some members that are homeless. We have members living with other members because they can't afford to get their own place."

What Hopkins does not note is that it was his local leadership that agreed to these concessions. Workers voted twice to strike but were forced to wait two years for a new contract. When the union finally reached a

tentative agreement, they rushed it through as quickly as possible, not allowing workers to see it until the vote.

This was part of a long line of UFCW betrayals in 2022 in particular, including the sellout of the King Soopers strike in Colorado in January and betrayals in Indiana, Southern California and Columbus, Ohio later that year.

In Colorado, workers struck for 10 days, only for the strike to be called off. Workers were then not allowed to see the contract until they went to vote several days later. The union claimed the contract passed, but refused to release vote totals on a contract that included minor pay raises, increased healthcare costs and maintained a two tier wage structure.

When UFCW 700 forced through its own sellout in Indianapolis, just a few months later the local union deleted its own Facebook page to dodge overwhelming outrage from its own members. Workers in Columbus voted down the same contract three times before opposition from the rank and file was worn down.

Hopkins, who makes more than \$320,000 a year, is blowing hot air about the contract. Speaking on the current contract, Hopkins said that “Going down in rate isn’t part of the deal when you go to work for a company. That’s just nuts.” If he genuinely believed this then why did the UFCW bring back a contract that included that very provision?

Kroger workers no doubt are ready to fight, the recent strike authorization at 455 and the wave of major contract struggles over the past years demonstrate that, but they will not find support in the bureaucratic apparatus that has consistently colluded with management to enforce cost-saving contracts that favor the company.

Workers at Kroger must take matters into their own hands and turn to their fellow workers to support them. The Kroger contract in Houston expires on February 24, just a few days before the contract for Teamsters members at Anheuser-Busch (AB) expires on February 29. Anheuser-Busch workers have also authorized strike action, and one of AB’s 12 breweries is in Houston.

Both sets of workers are part of a growing upsurge in the class struggle, but are shackled by bureaucracies that are far more aligned with management than their own members. Union bureaucrats like Hopkins will cry

crocodile tears about the hardships their members go through, then negotiate a contract that sells them out to management.

The way forward for Kroger workers is the formation of rank-and-file committees, organized by and for the rank and file to mobilize opposition to any sellouts and to fight for the contract Kroger workers deserve. These committees must put the rank and file in control and connect their struggles with those of other workers such as the Anheuser-Busch workers in Houston to win the contract they deserve.



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