

“The company bought out the union”: UFCW claims ratification of sellout contract for California Food 4 Less grocery workers

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Work at Food 4 Less? Tell us what you think about the contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Wednesday evening, the United Food and Commercial Workers claimed the ratification of a new contract covering 6,000 low-wage grocery workers employed by the Food 4 Less chain in California. The agreement was announced in defiance of an overwhelming strike authorization vote by Food 4 Less workers over the past few weeks.

The UFCW in its announcement did not release any vote totals or percentages, raising questions about the integrity of the vote. But even if workers voted to approve the deal, it is only because the UFCW bureaucracy made clear it would do everything it could to block a struggle.

Workers were told they would not be given a copy of the full contract to study until they cast their vote, underscoring the undemocratic character of the entire course of the struggle.

The central items concerning grocery workers are improvements in their wages. The proposed agreement contains starting wages only \$0.30 above the state minimum wage of \$16 an hour, with \$0.25 increases between steps after that. The increases vary depending on step, but those on the very bottom of the pay scale will only see a \$0.70–0.80 raise between now and the end of the contract.

UFCW is attempting to sell the agreement to employees by celebrating it has won an increase of \$3.50 over the life of the contract to 2026. This is highly disingenuous because the minimum wage in California is expected to increase to \$18 in 2025.

Meanwhile, Food 4 Less’ parent company, The Kroger Co. and its subsidiaries bring in billions of dollars in revenue every year.

Grocery workers were considered “essential” throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and placed at higher levels of risk and exposure in their workplaces. The suffering and death that occurred as a result of the ruling class policies

significantly impacted grocery workers who have expressed anger and outrage over the poor treatment they have received from Kroger Inc., which runs Food 4 Less, and their supposed representatives in the UFCW.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to Food 4 Less workers in Southern California, who denounced the deal. Some workers told reporters that they had not received the email with the information about the tentative agreement or instructions on how to vote as of Monday evening, the day before the end of the vote.

A cashier told the WSWS:

We are way behind. For 20-something years I’ve worked for a 25 cent [raise] each contract. I said to the union, “You guys are still not going to get us some money.” I started working here because I was young. I just went on with it because I was married, and I just let it go. But then I kept saying, “Why 25 cents every time we went in there; 25 cents for all those years?”

And I told the union, “You guys are still pulling the same s—t for this company.” I do blame them. That’s what I keep telling everybody—It’s the union. They are so crooked. One of my customers told me, “Did you know that the company buys out the union?” I never knew, I never thought of it that way.

Another Los Angeles worker said:

The union said this year we had to give all the departments something. That’s why the top tiers got left out. But top tier people like me have been here a lot of years.

The union has these call-ins, but people don’t tune

in to them because they might be at home now, or they might be some place that they can't listen in, and they don't believe it anyway.

Something is not right that this big old company can't pay us. We're working hard, but we're still getting underpaid. And we get out of our beds, and we come to work every freaking day. We must reject it. It's a sellout agreement.

Another workers said to reporters: "I told the union, 'You guys sold us out again. You guys are like working against us.'" Another said, "We asked for a strike, and they tossed it out, basically."

Workers discussed the escalating costs of living, and how their wages are not keeping up with the increases in expenses. One worker said:

We're already struggling. My bills went way up, an extra \$100. Where am I going to get that? It was the electricity. It was my car insurance. My insurance was down to \$59. But last month it went up to \$140. My electricity bill went up \$50. I was keeping all the lights off, not using the microwave and unplugging stuff. Then I got it down to \$90. But guess what? It went back up to \$150 because they put a tax on it! And then our phone bill, T-Mobile, went up \$10.

In San Diego, a retiree told the WWSWS he depends on his job at Food 4 Less to supplement his Social Security, and that his pay started out around \$16.10 per hour. "If I had to pay rent, pay a car note, take care of a family, I wouldn't be able to make it on this wage." A cashier added, "I'm topped out in pay and was not making enough for rent."

Widespread opposition is also present on the UFCW's social media pages. One worker replied to a union post on the contract:

People ain't playing. UFCW and these companies need to understand that we went through a pandemic where we were literally risking our lives for these companies and once it ended, the first thing on their agenda was shafting us so they could recoup more money. We're not going to be satisfied with their small concessions and call it good. My next question for you Food For Less workers is how much of a percent increase is this \$3.50 raise over 3 years? Is it MORE than the crippling inflation that we've gone

through for these past couple of years? Or less?

I see some details in that hyperlink but not much. Will you guys see the full contract and pay scale only when you're given a meeting place to vote yes or no & then given absolutely no time to think it over and discuss it among yourselves, your family, and your co-workers? Because in my experience during the last ratification, you're just given a location and then the union reps just happy talk even a sh*tty contract and urge you to vote yes. That's not exactly my idea of fighting for us. It's more like helping the company finalize a crap deal.

Another worker wrote, "It's honestly a crap contract. That's the same contract that the company gave us when the contract expired. So basically all those meetings they have after that were for nothing since they caved into the company."

The sellout contract served to isolate workers in spite of favorable conditions for a broader struggle. Currently, 600 Smart & Final grocery workers are on strike in Los Angeles against the same exploitation and poverty wages. Meatpacking workers in Ontario, Canada, are in the fifth week of their powerful strike demanding higher wages and have rejected the concessionary deal brought to them by the UFCW.

CVS pharmacy workers and Disneyland workers are also facing pending contract expirations in southern California.

The union bureaucracy, tied to the Democratic Party and the ruling class, works to limit the scope and scale of the demands of workers. Their function is to ensure workers are kept on the job, maintain "labor peace" and work overtime to ensure the economic demands do not assume a political character and link up with expanding anti-war sentiment and opposition to the Biden administration and the capitalist system which is backing imperialist war and genocide.

Grocery workers must organize a fight against the sellout union bureaucrats by organizing themselves in independent rank-and-file committees to take control of the struggle, which the UFCW is working to strangle.



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