

“What’s happening to us will directly affect all workers”

California grocery warehouse workers fight unionbusting by Smart & Final

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Over 600 workers, members of Teamsters Local 630, have been on strike for two weeks at two Chedraui-owned Smart & Final grocery warehouses in the City of Commerce and Riverside in the Los Angeles area. On Monday, July 1, all of the truck drivers were fired.

Many of the workers facing termination have over 30 years’ seniority and are making about \$32 an hour—barely a living wage in California. The workers are fighting a union-busting campaign involving mass layoffs and the destruction of their working conditions, benefits and pay. This is the second strike the workers, who are currently being represented by the Teamsters, have levied against Smart & Final.

The Teamsters have filed over 30 Unfair Labor Practices charges with the National Labor Relations Board, none of which have prevented workers from being fired or have prompted the company to offer a decent contract.

Over a year ago, when the warehouse workers joined the Teamsters, the company promised the drivers that they would be retained if they would not join the union. The company never kept its promise, and it succeeded in dividing the truckers against the warehousemen.

Smart & Final, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2021, operates 254 grocery warehouse and food service stores, with 56 under its namesake banner and 198 under the Smart & Final Extra! banner, throughout California, Arizona and Nevada.

Smart & Final, based in Commerce, California, was acquired in 2021 by Chedraui USA, a Los Angeles-based grocery retailer. It had 25,000 employees at 380 store locations across three banners: Fiesta Mart, El Super and Smart & Final. That business is a subsidiary

of Mexican supermarket operator Grupo Comercial Chedraui, the third largest retailer in Mexico which is expanding its operations into the US grocery business.

At a meeting with employees last May, a Smart & Final executive announced that the company was planning to close five Southern California distribution centers. All employees at the warehouses would be terminated and have to reapply for their jobs at \$10-\$12 less per hour when a new 1.4-million square foot warehouse in Rancho Cucamonga opened. This facility is located over 50 miles away.

This threat came shortly after the workers at the Commerce warehouse had voted to unionize and days before a union election was scheduled to be held at the Riverside distribution center, leading many workers to claim that it was a vindictive response by the company to punish them for bringing in the union.

Currently, a full-scale scab workforce is working around the clock operating the warehouses and driving the trucks. To replace the warehouse workers, Chedraui flew in impoverished workers from South Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi and other Southern states, providing them with accommodations, per diem allowances and pay. Scab drivers now man JB Hunt trucks, which have replaced the traditional Smart & Final trucks.

The two warehouses serve as distribution centers for more than 250 Smart & Final grocery stores in California, Nevada, Arizona and northern Mexico.

The Teamsters’ answer to union busting has been to promote a bankrupt boycott campaign and to appeal to Democratic politicians to put pressure on the company through the bourgeois courts.

This is a dead end! Instead, workers must form

independent rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of their strike into their own hands. They must call upon the greater Los Angeles working class to shut down Smart & Final and defend the strikers. They must appeal to the thousands of workers in the grocery industry, such as a Food4Less, where a sellout contract was passed, and to the thousands of UPS workers who were betrayed by the Teamsters bureaucracy.

The WSWs spoke with Smart & Final workers picketing the City of Commerce warehouse. Tony has worked as a warehouseman for over 32 years. “At the end of the day, all of us are going to lose our jobs. I’ve been here almost 33 years. It’s all I know, and to be left out on the street at 52 years old is wrong. We don’t know our future. I have a 12-year-old kid. What will happen to our families? It’s our 401Ks, our pensions.”

He described the kind of conditions they faced. “We get treated like animals. Why are we getting offered to fill out an application for a job 100 miles away at \$10 less an hour? You don’t know what your schedule is. You don’t know what your days off are. You’re going to probably be working weekends. One day you’ll be cleaning toilets; another day you’ll be painting a wall; another day you’ll be picking products; another day driving a forklift. And you can easily get fired.

“Some people don’t understand that this affects everybody. What’s happening to us will directly affect all workers. What happens at Food4Less directly affects us. Whatever contract they get directly affects us. What happens to us affects them. If we allow the company to take \$10 an hour away from us, it’s going to affect the whole industry. Same thing will happen to healthcare workers, to teachers.”

Manuel has over 35 years’ seniority at the Commerce warehouse. “We’re all fired. We have to apply for the jobs at the new warehouse. They’ll cut our wages, and we’ll lose our seniority. A lot of us are top paid because we’ve been here a long time. Our jobs are being taken away, and it can happen to other businesses. It’s a chain reaction, and they’re breaking laws. They don’t care.

“After 35 years, I didn’t think I’d be having to look for a new job. This is all I’ve known for the past 35 years.

“To be cut down even \$10 makes a big difference in gas and inflation, which is going through the roof, and rent. A lot of people are struggling with rent here.

Rents are going up to \$4,000. It’s outrageous.

“A lot of guys are already getting second jobs, and they shouldn’t have to do that. Obviously the company doesn’t care. The owners don’t care. They only care about themselves and their profits.

“They’re bringing in people from out of state, from Texas, the Carolinas, getting agencies to hire and pay them to do whatever it takes to avoid negotiating with us, even if the job isn’t being done right.

“The drivers were promised that they’d keep their jobs. The owners said, ‘We need you as drivers.’ It was like a promise, like a handshake. So the drivers didn’t want to join the union with us. A couple weeks ago, they were notified that the company was going with a third-party trucking company. Now they’re losing their jobs. The company are union busters.”

When asked what he thought about the political situation and the Biden administration’s drive to war and supporting the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, he said, “I have two boys. My oldest was a Marine, and he’s already out. But my youngest son is in the Navy. He just got out from Japan for two years, but he’s on reserve for four years. So yes, I’m worried.

“And the situation is dangerous because of the nuclear weapons. That’s just going to end everything. All it takes is one rocket from one side to go up, then the next country and their allies send up another one. I mean, Biden has already given the okay for Ukraine to shoot missiles into Russia. What did Russia say? It’s going to do whatever it takes to protect their country. And that’s how it’ll happen.”



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