

7,000 California CVS retail pharmacy workers hold strike vote against poverty wages

Max Jones**17 September 2024**

Around 7,000 low-wage CVS retail pharmacy workers are voting to strike this week across the state of California. The workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), have been working under an expired contract since June 30.

The CVS strike vote coincides with a powerful strike by 33,000 Boeing workers along the West Coast who recently rejected a concessionary deal brought to them by the International Association of Machinists union bureaucracy—a sign of enormous potential for a broader movement of the working class.

Both Boeing and CVS workers are fighting against poverty wages. One Boeing worker noted: “McDonald’s makes more. Aldi’s makes more. Rent in the Seattle area is roughly \$3-\$4,000 for a single family home. I don’t know how anyone can afford to live here. We definitely can’t.”

Last October, pharmacy workers conducted a three day wildcat walkout dubbed “Pharmageddon,” where thousands of pharmacists across major chains such as CVS, Walgreens, and Rite Aid protested against low pay and understaffing. Many of the workers who participated in this wildcat action were not members of any union, testifying to the growing militancy of the rank-and-file.

The starting wage for CVS store associates is only \$16.20 an hour, a measly twenty cents over the state minimum wage. Starting lead pharmacy techs are making only \$18.15 an hour. The UFCW has not announced the wages that CVS is proposing, but has stated, “CVS is proposing a store associate still make less than \$20 an hour.”

By comparison, MIT’s Wage Calculator projects that a living wage for a single adult in the state of California

is \$27.32 an hour, while an adult with one child must make \$44.11 an hour.

CVS made \$11 billion in profits last year alone, paying shareholders \$3.1 billion in dividends. Workers have endured poverty while on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have experienced skyrocketing workloads both at CVS and other pharmacies, which function as a primary location where the population seeks vaccinations and other medicines to deal with disease.

According to the CDC, more than 307.4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been administered and reported in the United States. However, given the fact that the virus is continually mutating and thus requires periodic boosters, this is far below the level necessary to provide adequate protection to the country.

CVS workers face much higher risks of contracting COVID-19. Despite the fact that over a million people are contracting COVID-19 a day in the US, CVS eliminated COVID pay for workers when California stopped requiring it by law at the end of 2022.

The dangers of continual infections and reinfections also put CVS workers at much higher rates of Long COVID, or long lasting medical issues, as the virus attacks many different systems.

One CVS worker wrote on social media: “At work today I overheard my general manager tell an employee who tested positive for COVID yesterday that if he is feeling OK he can come to work tomorrow with a mask.” This is despite the formal company policy that workers must stay home for five days after testing positive for COVID-19.

Another worker commented, “They mandate five days out, but don’t pay out any more. So those without

available sick pay are incentivized to work through it, potentially infecting others and further damaging their own health and well-being.” Another added, “Our entire pharmacy staff had COVID but we still worked through it. No paid time off.”

CVS workers are in a powerful position to carry out a strike for higher wages and COVID safety. But the chief obstacle they face is the UFCW bureaucracy. It has left them working on an expired contract for well over two months.

After already delaying a strike vote, the UFCW is seeking to draw out the process until the end of the month through a fragmented procedure consisting of in-person voting at some locals and electronic voting at others. Final results are expected by September 27.

There is no central system for voting, with each local having their own vote process. For instance, Local 135 is voting electronically from September 23 at 8:00 p.m. through September 25 at 5:00 p.m., while Local 324 is voting in person this week, ending on Thursday.

The UFCW bureaucracy has already welcomed a federal mediator to the bargaining table in July whom they described as a “neutral party who can help us ensure that bargaining is productive and fair.” This is an outright and dangerous lie. Federal mediators are not “neutral,” they serve the interest of corporations. Government-backed mediation is routinely used to block strikes and impose contracts favorable to management.

The most infamous example was in 2022, when the Biden administration used a “Presidential Emergency Board” to help impose a deal on 120,000 railroad workers.

The UFCW has also tried to restrain workers by calling for an Unfair Labor Practice strike vote. The leadership claims that such a strike, if it demands pay raises, is illegal under US labor law. These claims are used to shut down the strike at a moment’s notice, on the pretense that management has suddenly “become serious.”

Even while they have allowed talks to drag on for two months, the UFCW admits that CVS is dealing ruthlessly with workers, alleging that it has “been breaking the law by committing numerous unfair labor practices, like unlawful surveillance of workers, retaliation for union activity, and blocking us from talking to our Union Representatives.”

In order to circumvent the UFCW bureaucracy and ensure a contract like the current one isn’t shoved on them, workers must take matters into their own hands, building a CVS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, to enforce the democratic will of the membership and prepare for a real fight.

The fight by CVS workers is part of a broader struggle by the working class, including the Boeing strike, a potential East Coast dock strike at the end of the month, 50,000 Washington state employees, railroad workers and others.

With widespread popular support from other sections of the working class, CVS workers are in a position to potentially wield tremendous power against this massive corporation and empower other workers to do the same against their exploiters.



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