

Talks resume on final day of contract extension for King Soopers grocery workers in Colorado, 3 years after 10-day strike

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Grocery workers: Tell us what your working conditions are like and what your demands are! Fill out the form below . All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Contract negotiations resumed Wednesday between United Food and Commercial Workers union Local 7 (UFCW) and King Soopers and City Market in Colorado. The contract had been set to expire on January 4, but the union and company agreed to extend the contract until January 16. Negotiations are also ongoing at Safeway (owned by Albertsons), which had its contract extended to January 24.

At issue in the King Soopers talks is an attack on the living standards and working conditions of workers designed to reduce staffing and wages and to force workers to bear the cost of the failed \$25 billion merger with Albertsons, who is suing Kroger for failing to pass regulatory hurdles to the merger.

In the contract proposal, part-time workers will only be guaranteed a minimum of 20 hours a week and employees hired after the new contract would only be guaranteed 16 hours a week. This is part of a long standing effort by Kroger and other retail chains to reduce their workforce to a low-wage caste of part-time employees. Part-time workers would also be eligible to be scheduled hours outside of their availability making scheduling a nightmare for workers, especially those with families or who are in school while working.

The contract would also abolish overtime pay for new hires for more than 8.5 hours of work in a day (or 10.5 hours for schedules with 10-hour workdays). Instead, new hires would only be eligible for overtime after more than 40 hours of work in a full workweek. It would also extend the time required for an employee to be recognized as full-time, extending the period in which they must be scheduled at full-time hours from four consecutive weeks to 16 weeks for new hires and 12 weeks for those hired before the contract.

The contract would include paltry wage increases for workers. New clerks would see their starting pay increase

from \$17.65 an hour in 2025 to just \$18.40 an hour in 2028. Top pay for clerks would rise from \$23.86 to \$26.11. Top rate for clerks was \$22.61 as of January 2024, meaning the contract would raise top rate wages by \$3.50 over four years or just 3.35 percent, just slightly over inflation. Courtesy clerks will see top rate increases from \$18.65 to \$19.75 (1.4 percent per year), and pharmacy technicians will increase from a top rate from \$20.60 to \$24.10 (3.6 percent per year).

Wage increases will be even lower for City Market employees in Grand Junction and Clifton.

In Denver, where most of the stores are located, the living wage for a single person is \$25.62, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator. But even the most experienced clerks would make only \$23.86 an hour, and new hires would make just \$19.25 an hour. The minimum wage in the area was raised to \$18.81 on January 1.

Details of contract negotiations with Albertsons/Safeway have not been released by the company or the union. However, union statements on negotiations have highlighted issues, including requirements to be classified as full-time, proposals to allow the construction of non-union stores, outsource work to third-party vendors and the removal of seniority status for workers hired before 1996 who have grandfathered benefits after concessionary contracts established lower tiers for new workers.

The contract would also raise employee contributions to healthcare coverage and cap employer contribution growth at 3 percent a year and fails to increase contributions to the pension plan, essentially making a cut in real dollars.

The UFCW has not published any details on wages but has highlighted staffing and safety at both Albertsons and King Soopers as major issues for workers. This was also expressed by workers commenting on the union's Facebook page, noting that low staffing levels at stores was creating unsafe working conditions.

Negotiations have been ongoing for months, with the union saying that it had made "zero progress" earlier this

month before the contract extension. Despite this, the union and company have only agreed to resume negotiations just one day before the extension expires at King Soopers. While the union has posted several pictures of workers holding signs that say “ready to strike,” the union has not called for a strike vote.

Speaking with ABC 7 during the last round of negotiations, UFCW Local 7R President Kim Cordova said, “The soonest we could strike would be once we have a vote. We could vote as soon as [Sunday] if we wanted to. It really depends on what kind of progress we see today.” Yet no strike vote has been held or even planned.

Responding to a post on Facebook from the union, one worker asked “What happens if nothing happens with negotiations? The contract ends on the 16th and if negotiations don't go anywhere we would need to have a strike vote. How can we do that if negotiations are the same day the contract ends?”

The posturing of the union leadership is reminiscent of the “Strike Ready” campaign of the Teamsters during contract negotiations with UPS, where the Teamsters endorsed a sellout contract that failed to protect jobs against the accelerating wave of automation.

While the union has made multiple posts denouncing the company’s contract, it has not put forward a full list of its own demands. Workers asking for updates on negotiations on social media have simply been told to attend a bargaining session, which are often held during working hours and at hotels that can be difficult for workers to reach.

The lessons from the 2022 King Soopers strike must be assimilated in the fight against the demands of management. Under pressure from the rank and file, the union bureaucracy was forced to call a 10-day strike. But the union did everything it could to isolate workers. Workers in Colorado Springs were kept on the job, while a strike at Safeway was avoided despite the two contracts expiring at the same time.

When a new tentative agreement was reached, the union called off the strike and withheld information about the contract until voting was held in-person. Only during voting were workers given access to the contract, and they were not given time to carefully review the details and discuss among each other.

That contract was a sellout through and through. The union said it would fight for a \$6 wage increase. Instead, most workers received just pennies more than the company’s final offer and starting wages just above the minimum wage. It also included increases to health coverage costs, prohibited workers from taking sick leave to protect themselves from COVID-19 and included a clause to allow worse contract terms to be imposed if the UFCW agreed to them at another grocery chain.

The 2022 strike betrayal and the refusal of the union to carry out any actual strike preparations, despite the company demanding severe concessions, raises the necessity for workers to take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees that can organize opposition to the company’s offer, demand a strike vote and ensure rank-and-file control over all negotiations.

Kroger is the largest grocery chain in the United States. For several years it has posted \$4 billion plus profits and continues to authorize massive stock buybacks to enrich its investors. Investigations into the living standards of Kroger workers show that many are food- and housing-insecure under the crushing weight of low pay and the high cost of living.

The sellout at King Soopers laid the groundwork for other sellouts throughout 2022, including in California, Texas and Indiana. During the contract struggle at Fort Wayne, Indiana, the UFCW made workers vote on the same contract four times before it was ratified by a razor thin margin.

To prevent a repeat of the betrayals of 2022 King Soopers workers and grocery workers across the US, union and non-union, they must organize in a common struggle against the corporate onslaught against wages, jobs and working conditions. The UFCW bureaucracy cannot be entrusted with the leadership of such a struggle. Despite boasting 1 million members and a billion dollars in assets, the union refuses to carry out a common fight. The international leadership would not even put up opposition to the proposed merger of Kroger and Albertsons, which would have destroyed tens of thousands of jobs.

The WSWS encourages King Soopers, Safeway and all grocery and retail workers to contact us and to build rank-and-file committees, new democratic organizations of workers’ struggle, to organize this fight.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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