

# Southern California grocery workers must reject the UFCW's sellout!

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After an overwhelming strike authorization vote last month by 45,000 Southern California grocery workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) is attempting to ram through an insulting sellout deal behind workers' backs.

Ignoring the strike authorization vote, the union has moved swiftly to prevent a strike that would have sent shockwaves through the industry. On July 2 the union announced a tentative agreement without providing any details.

In a blatant effort to suppress opposition, the union scheduled just two Zoom meetings, this past Monday and Tuesday, to present the complex contract. Voting began immediately the next day, Wednesday, July 9, and will run through Friday, July 11.

This is a deliberate maneuver to curtail democratic discussion and force through a contract that enshrines poverty wages, fragmented raises and a continuation of grueling conditions. Far from a victory, this is a calculated betrayal.

The terms of the tentative agreement, detailed in the union's own handout, are a case study in how the union bureaucracy works to serve corporate interests while sabotaging the needs of rank-and-file workers.

The purpose of the deal and its meager, backloaded wage increases is not to raise living standards but to prevent a growing rebellion among retail workers from finding organized expression.

## A pittance in wage "increases"

The contract's most glaring betrayal lies in its insulting wage proposals—and even these refer only to the highest-paid workers in each job classification. The figures presented in the factsheet are top rates, meaning they apply exclusively to a limited layer of long-tenured employees. Thousands of grocery workers earn significantly less, with many starting at rates below \$17 an hour.

Even at the top rates, the wage increases are utterly inadequate. For Food Clerks, GM/Meat Clerks and Meat Cutters, the total wage increase over the three-year term is just \$3.70, trickled out in miserly increments—\$0.50 every six months—after an initial \$1.00 retroactive payment.

By 2027, the top Food Clerk rate will rise from \$26.75 to just \$30.45/hour. That may look like a step forward on paper, but when adjusted for inflation and rising living costs in California, the roughly 4 percent yearly increase in pay, amounting to less than 14 percent over three years, is ultimately a cut in real terms.

For GM/Meat Clerks with less than eight years of service, the top rate climbs from \$21.27 to \$24.97 by 2027—a mere \$3.70 over three years, or

roughly \$1.23/year. Again, this is the maximum rate, not the average. Many in this classification earn considerably less, especially newer hires and part-time workers. Even the supposedly more generous increases for workers with eight years or more—totaling \$4.95 over three years—only raise the top GM/Meat Clerk rate to \$27.22/hour by 2027.

Pharmacy Technicians are another case in point. The top rate goes from \$24.10 to \$27.60/hour over three years, with a total increase of just \$3.50. Yet these workers are expected to take on additional responsibilities such as immunization, for which they receive a modest \$2.25/hour premium. Even with these duties, their pay remains far below what is needed to live with any security in Southern California, where the average home cost is well over half a million dollars.

And at the bottom of the wage scale, the situation is even more dire. Courtesy Clerks, for instance, many of whom are young or part-time workers, are offered insulting premiums of just \$0.25 to \$0.50/hour when performing work in higher classifications. One provision even acknowledges that some Courtesy Clerks will receive only \$0.10/hour extra—until the state minimum wage catches up. This is a direct admission that their wages are being tethered not to the cost of living or job responsibilities but to the legal minimum employers are required to pay.

The UFCW is touting top-line wage figures as if they represent the majority of the workforce, when in fact they mask the widespread poverty and exploitation endured by most employees. The vast majority of grocery workers will remain trapped in wage brackets far below these so-called "top rates," with no meaningful path upward.

Moreover, the structure of the agreement is a mechanism to protect company profits. Many of the raises are spaced out over 36 months, giving corporations ample time to recoup costs through inflation, productivity increases or labor cuts. While workers scrape by today, the employers enjoy an immediate windfall from having dodged a strike and locked in cheap labor.

## Deceptive "benefits" hide real cuts

The UFCW touts the maintenance of pension contributions and modest improvements to healthcare, such as eliminating the Silver Plan and automatic enrollment into the Gold Plan. But these tweaks are mere window dressing. The so-called supplemental pension contribution of \$0.25/hour beginning in 2026 is an insult, and the total employer healthcare contribution—topping out at just \$4.98/hour—is hardly enough to withstand rising medical costs and inflation.

Moreover, based on past experiences workers reported on social media that, in the case of Kroger the Gold Plan is fully controlled by the company, which can unilaterally change contributions or benefits at any time. Moreover, Kroger is expected to require minimum hours on being

eligible for healthcare, ratcheting up every year of the contract.

Much of the “benefit improvements” language reads as internal administrative changes that do little to expand access, reduce out-of-pocket costs, or improve the quality of coverage. These are not gains—they are bookkeeping adjustments meant to pad the union’s talking points.

### **Automation and austerity codified**

In a further blow to workers, the agreement formalizes the expansion of self-checkout systems, a major driver of job losses. The token requirement that a single full-service lane be kept open, or that one employee monitor multiple self-check stations, is laughably insufficient to stem the tide of automation.

In anticipation of artificial intelligence (AI) replacing thousands of workers without compensation in the near future, the union has revealed it has effectively negotiated away these jobs in exchange for vague promises of state funding grants to “train employees for future jobs” in bakery, service deli, and meat departments.

Their so-called plan to retrain workers for roles supposedly less vulnerable to automation is absurd—No job is truly irreplaceable. Moreover, this training will be funded through state grants, not directly by the employer. This means the cost ultimately falls on workers and taxpayers, while the company is free to eliminate countless jobs without responsibility to retain displaced employees.

The “new staffing language” is another corporate concession, offering vague assurances that staffing will be “reasonable,” with no mechanism to enforce it. Workers know exactly what this means: being forced to do more with less, covering for chronic understaffing, and dealing with angry customers and overburdened departments.

### **Opening the door for the immigration Gestapo**

In a misnamed section titled “Worker Rights Protection,” the union admits that it has entered into an agreement with the employer to cooperate with police agents from the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The union claims the new agreement will “not allow DHS or ICE agents to access *non-work areas* of the store without a warrant.” (Emphasis added)

This, of course, opens the door for the immigration Gestapo to access *work-areas of the store without a warrant*. In Los Angeles and across the country, ICE, DHS and Customs and Border Protection agents have staged raids outside and inside major retailers, including Home Depot and Wal-Mart assaulting and kidnapping immigrant and US citizen workers alike. This agreement codifies similar police state actions at grocery stores.

### **The role of the UFCW**

The union bureaucracy’s role in this debacle cannot be overstated. UFCW officials have deliberately worked to shield the corporations from any disruption. UFCW kept workers on the job after the strike

authorization vote and only held a few pickets within the confines of an “unfair labor practice” isolating the struggle and workers’ demands. Now the bureaucracy is imposing a company-friendly deal on the membership before a serious discussion or opposition could develop.

Everything about this contract process—the timing, the compressed vote window, the lack of in-person meetings—is designed to prevent workers from organizing a fight. The UFCW leadership is terrified not of the companies but of the rank and file discovering its own power. A strike would not only have demanded better wages, it would have exposed the union’s real role in suppressing struggle.

The UFCW is suppressing every struggle of its members. Only in the last few days it sabotaged Colorado grocery workers by shutting down the Safeway strike and announcing a deal at King Soopers, while Indianapolis Kroger workers have rejected a UFCW sellout agreement and are demanding strike action.

The UFCW is actively working to prevent workers from building the independent, militant resistance that is desperately needed.

### **“I support any store that wants to do a wildcat strike independent of the UFCW’s ‘permission.’”**

Jill, a former member of the UFCW union who worked at the Metropolitan Market in Seattle, recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“I experienced all of the same problems the Kroger and Safeway workers are going through right now around the country as they try to get a better contract and are going on strike. I support any store that wants to do a wildcat strike independent of the UFCW’s ‘permission.’”

Jill explained that the insurance offered by the company was too expensive for most workers making poverty wages, especially when union dues are factored in.

She said the union took out “\$30 per check,” adding, “\$60 per month is an enormous amount of money for a low wage worker. Many workers reported not being able to afford to buy groceries. Even those who made slightly higher wages struggled to make ends meet at those rates.

“This is a cruel situation workers are forced into. It makes us hate and resent the union which takes our money but does nothing for us.”

### **A call for Rank-and-File Committees – Vote NO!**

This contract must be rejected. It offers no path to a living wage, job security or dignity at work. It is a deal crafted for Kroger and Albertsons and rammed through by a bureaucracy that fears the workers more than it fears the bosses.

What is needed is the formation of independent rank-and-file committees—democratic organizations of workers who reject the corrupt alliance between the UFCW and corporate management. These committees must take the fight into their own hands, organize against this betrayal, prepare for the strike that the union has tried to bury and expand it to a general strike.

Only through the independent action of the working class can the fight for real wages, real rights and real power begin. Reject the sellout. Build the opposition. Prepare for struggle.



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