

Stater Bros. workers vote overwhelmingly to strike as UFCW moves to sabotage struggle

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In an explosive expression of opposition approximately 12,000 Stater Bros. grocery workers across Southern California voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike in a two-day ballot held July 24–25. Represented by several United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) locals, these workers have taken a courageous step forward, expressing the pent-up anger of some of the most exploited sections of the workforce.

The historic vote marks the first strike authorization in the 89-year history of Stater Bros., a multibillion-dollar grocery chain headquartered in San Bernardino. The development is the outcome of immense and growing rank-and-file pressure, five months after their labor agreement expired on March 2. But far from preparing a genuine strike or a serious struggle, the UFCW bureaucracy is doing everything in its power to suppress the movement and deliver another sellout deal.

Ignoring the strike vote, union bureaucrats are instead organizing single store boycotts. One is scheduled for Monday in Pasadena. This follows a similar stunt in Long Beach this past Friday, again, targeting one store for one day.

The union framed the strike vote in the narrowest legal terms, limiting it to “Unfair Labor Practices” (ULP), a mechanism that, while dealing with legitimate grievances, is being used to sideline the broader fight for living wages, safe conditions and full-time jobs. The UFCW explicitly stated that a strike is a “last resort,” and just a few days after the vote, returned to the bargaining table with Stater Bros., promising to work out a “tentative agreement.”

Workers must take this as a warning. Just like in previous grocery battles involving Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Safeway, the UFCW is working hand in glove with corporate management and the Democratic Party to prevent any real strike or mass movement.

Stater Bros. workers are among the most poorly compensated in the grocery industry. Courtesy Clerks—the lowest-paid classification—earn between \$16.70 and \$27.00 per hour. For younger workers between 18 and 24, most hover at the minimum wage level: \$16.70 to \$17.68 an hour.

Even experienced employees aged 25 and older rarely cross the \$20 mark. These figures are barely above California’s state minimum wage of \$16.50 and are wholly insufficient to survive in one of the most expensive regions in the country.

While Stater Bros. workers are paid poverty wages, they generated roughly \$5 billion in revenue in 2024, according to *Forbes*. In the first 39 weeks of 2025, *Supermarket News* reported that Stater Bros. profits were \$9.2 million. Since 2013, CEO of Stater Bros, Peter Van Helden has received a base salary of at least \$550,000 per year along with “potential bonuses, and benefits such as a company car, health insurance and paid vacation.”

Across Southern California, working families face exorbitant rents, skyrocketing food and utility prices and a public health system in crisis. Compounding the situation is the intensifying political climate under Donald Trump’s escalating anti-immigrant campaign.

In Los Angeles County alone, one million residents are undocumented, and an estimated two million more live with an undocumented family member. ICE raids and workplace surveillance are escalating, and yet the UFCW offers no defense. Instead, it appeals to the same Democratic Party officials who slashed aid to undocumented immigrants in the latest state budget.

There are many immigrants among grocery workers. The union claims to “stand in solidarity” with them, but in practice does nothing to protect them. It operates as an appendage of the Democratic Party and enforcer of corporate labor discipline.

The UFCW is focusing the strike authorization narrowly on unfair labor practices—charges that are not unimportant, but are being used to avoid confronting the underlying economic and political issues. These include surveillance of union activists, discrimination based on union support, unlawful interrogation, bypassing the union to speak directly with workers, failure to provide bargaining information.

These practices reflect the company’s hostile and anti-worker stance. But by centering the strike vote on these procedural violations alone, the UFCW is avoiding a

confrontation over the real and urgent needs of workers: living wages, health care, pensions, adequate staffing and protections for immigrant workers.

The UFCW's own statement confirms this approach: "Since March, we've pushed Stater Bros. for real solutions to short staffing, unsafe conditions, and unfair wages, but all we've seen is disrespect of our rights as reflected in these ULP charges." In other words, instead of escalating the fight for workers' actual demands, the union is turning it into a legal dispute over managerial conduct.

The UFCW's conduct in recent struggles provides a clear roadmap for how it intends to suppress this fight.

At Northern California Safeway and Southern California Ralphs/Albertsons, the UFCW pushed through pro-company contracts by isolating struggles, concealing negotiating details, avoiding strikes and claiming victory after securing paltry wage increases of \$1 or less per year for a limited number of workers. This is precisely what is being prepared now.

Stater Bros. workers are demanding:

Substantial wage increases indexed to inflation

Guaranteed healthcare coverage for all classifications

Secure retirement plans, not the gutted pensions of recent sellouts

Safe staffing levels and an end to chronic understaffing

Full-time job opportunities

- Basic workplace protections, especially for immigrant workers

Guarantees against technological displacement

Stater Bros. rejected these demands outright. The company claimed that even the union's minimal proposal—far less than what workers actually need—would cost \$112.1 million annually. This from a company that reports \$5 billion in yearly sales. According to the union, each worker generates roughly \$333,000 in revenue, while the company claims the average cost per employee is \$74,000. The disparity exposes the enormous profits being extracted from the labor of underpaid and overworked employees.

On July 30, the UFCW confirmed that it had resumed negotiations. "We came back to the bargaining table today to get a tentative agreement that we can recommend to you," the union declared on Facebook. This is the language of a bureaucracy preparing another backroom deal.

No details have been shared with the membership. As always, the UFCW is operating in total secrecy, preparing to spring a vote on workers before they can organize or even discuss its contents. This is exactly how previous betrayals were engineered.

Stater Bros. workers are facing a battle not just against the company, but against the union apparatus that claims to represent them. The UFCW is not a workers' organization.

It is a corporatist entity, integrated into the management structure, functioning as a labor contractor for the grocery giants. Its role is to isolate, divide, demobilize and ultimately betray.

But workers are not powerless. They have already demonstrated immense courage and unity by voting for a strike. Now this momentum must be taken forward.

Workers must build independent rank-and-file committees at every Stater Bros. location—democratically controlled by workers themselves, with no ties to the union bureaucracy. These committees should:

- Take immediate control over negotiations, which must be livestreamed and available to the rank and file

Call for revotes on any contract proposal

- Organize to link up with grocery, logistics, healthcare and immigrant workers across the region and beyond

- Prepare mass action, including strike action, not limited by ULP laws

- Develop a fighting program based on workers' actual needs, not what the company claims it can afford

- Prepare for a political struggle against the Trump administration and the California state Democrats, both united in their attacks on workers and immigrants

The logic of the situation is clear: the struggle at Stater Bros. must become the starting point for a broader offensive by the working class, against the dictatorship of the corporations, the collaboration of the unions and the complicity of both capitalist parties.

Victory will not come through appeals to Democrats or "customer boycotts." It will come when workers unite across racial, generational and citizenship lines, seize control of their own struggle, and fight for what is rightfully theirs.



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