Southern California grocery pharmacists authorize strike

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Hundreds of unionized grocery pharmacists at Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions voted July 15–16 to authorize a strike. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) represents nearly 800 pharmacists across Southern and Central California through Locals 8GS, 135, 324, 770, 1167, 1428 and 1442.

The vote does not mean that a strike has begun, and the UFCW has not announced a strike date. The pharmacists have been working under an agreement that expired March 1, with its existing provisions and protections still in force. Negotiations are scheduled to resume August 6 and 7 at UFCW Local 324 in Buena Park.

The vote reflects a growing determination among pharmacists to fight conditions that endanger both workers and patients.

Those conditions have worsened as the chains expand pharmacists' responsibilities while holding down staffing. Grocery pharmacists dispense and review prescriptions, check for dangerous interactions, counsel patients, administer vaccines and specialty injections, resolve insurance problems, handle travel medications and provide an expanding range of clinical services. They often do this while answering nonstop calls and supervising cross-trained grocery clerks rather than dedicated pharmacy technicians.

The shutdown of Rite Aid's remaining stores in 2025 has added to the pressure by shifting patients and prescriptions into other retail pharmacies. According to the UFCW, grocery pharmacists are now absorbing that increased volume without corresponding support and earn about 11 percent less than pharmacists at CVS. Some work 12-hour shifts, and the companies are seeking to eliminate their contractual option of a one-hour meal period in favor of a single 30-minute lunch.

Craig Chally, a longtime Vons pharmacist in Thousand Oaks, described reviewing prescriptions, checking drug interactions, giving vaccinations, dealing with insurers and counseling patients amid constant phone calls and growing lines. "The current workload is not sustainable," he said at a March action called by the union. "Safe staffing protects patients."

A patient survey released by the UFCW in March found that 59 percent of respondents said pharmacy lines had increased over the previous four years, while 48 percent reported waits longer than 10 minutes. Most seriously, 11.9 percent—about one in nine—said they had received a medication error. The survey gives a glimpse of the consequences of subordinating pharmacy staffing to corporate profit.

The pharmacists are demanding that language from California's existing staffing law, including protections against fatigue, distraction and unsafe working conditions, be written into the contract. That would allow workers to enforce it through the grievance procedure rather than having to take each violation to the state Board of Pharmacy. The companies have rejected the proposal on the grounds that the language is already state law—an admission that they oppose making the protections directly enforceable by the workforce.

The companies' current wage proposal, according to the UFCW's July 1 bargaining summary, is $5 over three years with no retroactive increase: $1.75 upon ratification, $1.50 in March 2027 and $1.75 in March 2028. The union proposal is $9.95 over two years, including a $5 increase retroactive to March 2026 and $4.95 in March 2027. The companies have also rejected a $2-an-hour premium for pharmacists providing specialty clinical services and offered only 16.4 cents an hour in additional pension contributions against a proposal of 75 cents.

The companies also want to limit the department-head premium to $1.50 an hour instead of the proposed $4.50, have rejected added compensation for floaters reassigned on short notice to more distant stores, and oppose a fifth week of vacation after 20 years for workers hired after 2004.

Kroger and Albertsons can easily meet the workers' demands. Kroger reported $46.1 billion in sales and $1.4 billion in operating profit in the first quarter of 2026, while its board had authorized another $2 billion in share repurchases. Albertsons reported $24.94 billion in quarterly revenue and more than $1 billion in adjusted earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization. Pharmacy sales were an area of growth, even as Albertsons repurchased $226.5 million in shares and increased its dividend by 13 percent.

The decisive question is for the rank-and-file to take direct control over the struggle. At present, control remains in the hands of the UFCW apparatus. Their instructions state that pharmacists must remain at work until an official representative declares a strike. The authorization empowers the bargaining committee, not the rank and file, to decide whether a walkout "becomes necessary." This creates the danger that the vote will be ignored, or used to present a sellout as the product of a "credible strike threat."

There are direct precedents. In 2022, some 600 pharmacists at the same chains authorized strike action. When officials subsequently presented an agreement, Albertsons/Vons/Pavilions pharmacists initially rejected it, while Ralphs pharmacists accepted the same terms. A final four-year offer was later ratified without a strike. Four years later, the same basic problems remain.

Last year, 45,000 grocery workers at Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions voted to strike, only for the UFCW to prevent a walkout and push through a concessions contract after withholding the full agreement and limiting discussion before the vote.

The experience of the 31,000-worker Kaiser Permanente strike earlier this year provides another warning. More than 3,000 pharmacy and laboratory workers joined the struggle in a three-day walkout in February, while operating engineers were preparing separate strike action. UNAC/UHCP (United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals) officials nevertheless ended the main strike without a membership vote and before presenting workers with a tentative agreement. The simultaneous struggles also demonstrated the objective basis for a united movement. On February 5, grocery pharmacists joined a UFCW-organized Kaiser picket action around the common issues of unsafe staffing and crushing workloads.

The bureaucracy works to suppress struggles that threaten to escape its control because its privileged position depends upon its integration into management and the capitalist political establishment, above all, the Democratic Party. But the class struggle is bringing workers into increasingly direct collision with an apparatus that seeks to contain them.

In the first quarter of 2026 alone, there were 458 strikes across just eight European countries, including five general strikes at the national or regional level, according to Striketracker. In the United States, mass anti-ICE demonstrations have drawn millions into the streets, including 8 million in the March 28 "No Kings" mobilization.

These struggles remain, for the most part, under the control of official union apparatuses, which work to isolate and terminate them. But their scale expresses the objective pressures driving workers into struggle and increasingly bringing the rank and file into conflict with those apparatuses.

In California, 31,000 Kaiser workers and 6,400 San Francisco educators have struck this year. Another 42,000 University of California workers were preparing for an open-ended strike in May, only for AFSCME to cancel it hours before it was to begin after announcing a tentative agreement.

Pharmacists should organize now across all seven locals and four chains to develop this movement independently. They should establish a rank-and-file committee, elect trusted and recallable delegates at each workplace, create independent lines of communication and insist that all bargaining proposals be made public. Bargaining should be livestreamed, and no agreement should be put to a vote unless workers receive the full text well in advance and have time for collective discussion. The rank and file, not union officials, must control the timing and conduct of any strike and decide through a democratic vote whether it ends.

Such a committee should appeal directly to the 45,000 grocery workers at the same companies, to Kaiser and other healthcare workers, and to patients for common action around safe staffing, decent wages and fully funded healthcare. This is the means by which pharmacists can harness the broader movement of the working class rather than wait passively for decisions from the apparatus.

The fight also requires a fight against the Democratic Party, which defends Kroger, Albertsons and the profit system no less than the Republicans. The resources exist to provide safe pharmacies, decent living standards and high-quality healthcare for all, but they are controlled by corporations and a financial oligarchy. The struggle to place these resources under democratic social control must be developed through an independent political movement of the working class.