

Grocery workers in Colorado vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike action

By Jessica Goldstein
19 March 2019

Workers at Colorado grocery chains King Soopers and City Market voted by 92 percent Friday to authorize a state-wide strike. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 7 bargains for approximately 12,200 workers employed at the two chains' locations throughout the state. Despite the overwhelming vote the union has yet to set a date for a possible strike.

The grocery chains have been owned by Ohio-based Kroger since 1983. Kroger is the second-largest general retailer and one of the largest grocery store chains in the United States, taking in more than \$122 billion in revenue in 2018. Through its subsidiaries, Kroger controls the largest share of grocery sales in Colorado, operating over 150 stores in the state.

Workers at the King Soopers and City Market have been working without a contract since January 12. UFCW Local 7 and the companies have been in negotiations since the end of 2018. The companies' negotiators reportedly walked out of bargaining sessions held on March 8.

Workers are demanding higher wages and better healthcare and time off benefits. A meat cutter at King Soopers in Greeley, Colorado who spoke to Radio KUNC told reporters that he makes just \$20.40 per hour after 20 years of employment and must work another part-time job to cover necessary expenses. The same worker spoke of the abysmally low per-hour raises doled out by the Kroger corporation to its workers each year, dubbed the "Kroger quarter," because it is the highest raise that any of its workers will ever see.

In contrast, in 2015 Kroger CEO Rodney McMullen was paid a total of \$11.7 million, CFO J. Michael Schlotman was paid \$5.9 million, and executive vice president of merchandising Michael J. Donnelly earned a total of \$4.9 million off the backs of workers.

The current proposal put forth by the company at the two chains includes major concessions on wages and

health benefits. Raises of about \$14 per week are proposed for half of all full-time workers and \$7 per week for part-time workers, and employee sick leave pay is granted only on the first day of illness after ten years of service.

The current price for employee health care under the union contract is a whopping \$100 per month, which the company boasts as "best in class." This is an extremely expensive sum for workers who are paid such pitifully low wages to be forced to cough up each month. Workers are concerned that further increases to their already expensive healthcare costs will eat up more than the meager wage increases proposed by the corporation, effectively amounting to a significant pay cut.

UFCW Local 7 representatives said in statement after the powerful strike authorization vote they "hope King Soopers and City Market can return to the table with an offer that reflects the strong commitment to workers and customers that has made the company so successful for so many years, but if they don't we are prepared and ready to strike."

The union has made clear that it will do everything that it can to avoid a strike and they will not take the vote of the rank-and-file membership seriously. Evan Yeats, spokesman for Local 7, told Radio KUNC that "striking is a tough decision for everybody and we hope it doesn't come to that...The vote just gives the bargaining committee the ability to call the strike when they need to."

Local 7 President Kim Cordova says that the union is seeking to reconvene negotiations on March 23. The union has not called a strike against the two chains for over 20 years, with the last strike in 1996 ending after 44 days.

Workers at the two supermarket chains in Colorado have a right to be outraged at the attacks that the corporation has planned on their living conditions. They

are already part of one of the most heavily exploited and underpaid sections of workers in the United States and are being forced to accept even deeper cuts to their wages and benefits so that the millionaire executives at the top can increase their bloated wealth.

However, workers cannot trust the UFCW to carry out the kind of fight that will deal an effective blow to the capitalists who are collectively exploiting their labor for profit. While posturing as champions of the workers and feigning outrage at the corporate negotiators, the union has made it clear that it will not impede Kroger's ability to continue to amass profits throughout any potential strike.

King Soopers has already begun to hire scabs, including in its meat and deli departments, in preparation for a strike. UFCW Local 7 has been silent about this and has done nothing to mobilize workers against this preemptive attack. Earlier this month the union distributed flyers to workers listing job fairs for those "looking for a job to get through a potential strike," making clear that they will provide little to nothing in strike pay to support workers if they walk off the job.

Grocery workers in Colorado can learn from recent lessons of the strike authorization vote by UFCW workers at Stop & Shop in New England finalized one week prior to their own. Despite workers facing deep cuts to their living standards so that the company can bring their standard of living down to the level of exploitation faced by non-union Amazon, Walmart and Whole Foods workers, the union has refused to call a strike even after its 31,000 rank-and-file workers at Shop & Save stores voted for strike action after contracts expired February 23.

The union officials who are orchestrating the isolation and sellout of grocery workers across the country live in different worlds than the rank-and-file.

UFCW Local 7 President Cordova earns a total salary of more than \$167,000 per year, not including other compensation in the form of allowances and other payments. In fact, the UFCW local paid 27 of its officials more than \$100,000 in 2015. UFCW International President Anthony Perrone pulled in more than \$340,000 from the union in 2015 between his salary, benefits and other compensation. These sums are vastly more than what even the highest-paid hourly grocery worker can ever hope to make in a year, and is paid for by union dues out of the pockets of some of the lowest-paid workers in the country.

For workers to carry their struggle forward, they must

recognize that the union represents class interests of those opposed to their own. When the UFCW says that it hopes to avoid a strike and calls for the corporation to come to its senses, it is telling the workers that they should not fight for higher wages and benefits, but instead take whatever the millionaire executives will allow the workers to have while they continue to amass profits at the expense of their living standards and those of future generations.

There is a growing fear within both big business and its trade union partners that the class struggle could erupt on a massive scale. The UFCW, a part of the AFL-CIO union apparatus along with the teachers' unions, is working to systematically isolate workers from each other by suppressing strikes and preventing the class struggle from expanding out of its control, as was seen with the teachers' strike in Denver barely one month ago.

Workers at King Soopers and City Market should form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and develop their own set of demands based on what the workers need, not what the company says that they can have. These should include but not be limited to an automatic forty per cent wage increase for all workers, free healthcare benefits, paid sick days and time off to spend with family and friends.

Workers can only fight for their interests on the basis of an anti-capitalist and socialist program. This means that the workers in Colorado must link up with other grocery and retail workers in the United States and around the world, and with workers in those industries tightly linked to grocery retail work, such as logistics, transportation, manufacturing, meatpacking and agricultural workers, and other important sections of workers such as teachers, mine workers and other service workers.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>