

Strike of 31,000 New England Stop & Shop workers in sixth day

By our reporters
17 April 2019

The strike by 31,000 Stop & Shop workers at more than 240 supermarkets in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island is in its sixth day. The workers walked off the job Thursday after negotiations with management broke down over proposals from the company attacking workers' wages, health insurance and pension benefits.

Stop & Shop workers have not been on strike in 30 years, and their strike is the largest in the retail industry since 2003.

The United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) was forced to call the strike after Stop & Shop management refused to budge on demands that would make deep inroads into workers' pay and benefits for both present and future full- and part-time workers. The five UFCW locals had voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action after their contract expired February 23. Negotiations are continuing between the UFCW and Shop & Shop with a federal mediator.

Stop & Shop is owned by billion-dollar Dutch-owned company Royal Ahold Delhaize NV, which also owns Food Lion, Hannaford and other grocery chains and is the third largest supermarket owner in the US. Despite reporting profits of more than \$2 billion last year and spending \$4 billion in stock buybacks since 2017, the multinational company is seeking to drive down the wages and benefits of Stop & Shop workers to those at nonunion grocers such as Market Basket, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, and big-box stores such as BJ's, Walmart and Costco.

The company is seeking to drive a wedge between full- and part-time workers, and workers with higher seniority, by offering smaller wage increases for part-time workers and capping wage increases for full-time workers with less than three years on the job.

When the strike began last week, some stores were forced to close, while others reopened Friday with reduced hours, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., while keeping all in-store pharmacies and banks open. Stores are operating with skeleton staffs comprised of managers and strikebreakers brought in from other locations in vans, according to pickets.

The strike has won the support of many customers, who have chosen not to cross strikers' picket lines. With the Easter and Passover holidays beginning this weekend, many customers are choosing to shop elsewhere, with perishable meats, seafood and

produce and other food fast approaching their expiration dates in the deserted aisles of many Stop & Shop locations.

The supermarket has called in police and additional security officers across the chain's 241 locations. When Stop & Shop owns the parking lot, as it does at the McGrath Highway location in Somerville, Mass., strikers have been forced to stand at the entrances to the parking lot, away from the front of the store. Pickets told the WWS that they were not even allowed to park their cars in the lot, with management citing private property rights.

Although the UFCW paid its international president, Anthony Peronne, a salary of \$341,398, the union is not paying strike benefits to workers. It is also keeping tens of thousands of Stop & Shop workers in New York and New Jersey on the job, along with 60,000 Southern California workers at three major grocery chains—Ralphs, Vons and Albertsons—whose contract expired last month. As a result of the decades of collusion between the UFCW and the grocery chains, the wages of supermarket workers in California have fallen 25 percent since 1999.

Kayla has been working at Stop & Shop for eight years, beginning in high school as a bagger. She works in the bakery department at the Somerville store. She told our reporters, "For many of us, Stop & Shop is not just a job, it's our whole lives. I'm from a family of four, and every one of us works [at Stop & Shop]."

"Many of us work here six days a week. They are talking about getting us food stamps to get us through during the strike. In my family we don't have another income, and there is no talk of strike pay yet."

She went on explain what has driven the 31,000 workers to strike. "We are not asking for anything crazy. We just want to be able to make ends meet. The cost of living is going up. It is impossible to live on \$12 an hour. The company claims the average worker makes \$21 an hour, but that is a lie. That is for people who have been working at the company for over 20 years. The real average is \$13 or \$14 an hour and it is not enough to live."

We spoke to Kayla about how the conditions Stop & Shop workers face are the same as those of millions of workers throughout the US and around the world. She told us she had

heard about the teachers' strikes and feels the issues are the same. "It is all about the money," she said. Kayla expressed her support for the teachers, and all other workers who are facing similar conditions. "Of course, teachers deserve good pay," she said. "We certainly support them, and I think they should support us too."

One of Kayla's co-workers who wished to remain anonymous said, "We've got to hit them where it hurts, their profits. There are 30,000 of us out here, and it is costing them money. The real problem is that you have these billion-dollar corporations that are just messing with people's whole lives by what they are doing.

"We have no income. They won't give us enough hours to make enough to live anymore," she said. "They want to take away meat cutters, which means you are going to have pre-packed meat on the shelf and not have any idea what the shelf life is. It is bad for us and it is bad for customers."

Both women agreed that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans had any interest in the working class. Kayla's co-worker mentioned that Senator Elizabeth Warren had visited their picket line last week.

"They all just do such things for the publicity," she said. "They don't care. They want the photo. And it's all politicians. They are all alike. They control the money, and let me tell you—they put it in their pockets."

Paul, another striker in Somerville, spoke about the conditions Stop & Shop wants to impose on workers. "They want to raise the medical deductible from \$2,500 to \$5,000," he said. "They also want to make us pay more weekly on a premium. And then take away our time-and-a-half on Sunday. They don't want to contribute to the pension fund anymore.

"They also want to take away the pension for the newcomers. It's not just about us, it's about the people coming behind us."

"They want to take some of our state holidays away," he added. "They want to cut back on a few of our sick days. There are only nine, and they want to take away four. They want to cap vacations at three weeks, no matter how long you've been here. You could be here 30 years and they want to give you only three weeks."

Paul and his co-worker pointed out that many members of other unions had come down to support the picket line. Our reporters pointed out that the UFCW has some 1.3 million members in North America, at supermarkets and many other industries, and that these workers could be brought out on strike to support the Stop & Shop workers, but that that wasn't the strategy of the UFCW.

Paul responded, "The other five locals from Stop & Shop are all out. But if others have a contract, I don't think legally they can walk out," He added, "Our drivers from the Teamsters, they will not cross our picket lines. They are not making deliveries."

He wasn't sure about organizing broader strike action but said a general strike "would cripple the country. That's what it

would do."

We raised that the conditions faced by Stop & Shop workers were the same as those of young workers across the country, who are struggling to get by and are forced to work two or three jobs.

For instance, four decades ago in Detroit, autoworkers could own a good home and send their kids to decent schools. Now, new hires in the auto industry are earning \$15 an hour, and the corrupt United Auto Workers union has conspired with the auto companies to impose these conditions.

"I know what you mean," Paul said. "My daughter's a teacher. She gets out of school and she has to go to Walmart to do part-time work just to get what she needs so they can survive."

Paul's fellow striker Miguel agreed that these conditions are the same around the world. "It's a global economy," he said. "I'm from El Salvador. So, when Walmart got to my city, everybody was happy. The mayor said, 'I've got jobs, there will be jobs!' Then all the small businesses around there, they all closed. That's not good.

"Now Walmart is paying \$15 a day. Nobody can live over there on \$15. Because you go to the store and the prices are the same as before. Now all those people that had small businesses, they have to now go work at Walmart and work for nothing. Probably before they were making \$80 a day, now they have to work for nothing."

To rally support for their struggle, Stop & Shop workers should form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions, to reach out and mobilize the support of the broadest sections of the working class for mass demonstrations and joint strike action.

A call should be made for Stop & Shop workers in New Jersey and New York to join the strike and to prepare a nationwide strike of retail workers to fight poverty wages and the attack on health care and pension rights.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>