

10,000 Portland-area grocery workers authorize strike

By Norisa Diaz
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Ten thousand Portland-area grocery workers voted nearly unanimously last week to authorize United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555 to call a strike against the supermarket chains Albertsons, Fred Meyer, QFC, and Safeway. Negotiations between the UFCW and corporate management have not resulted in a new contract in over a year.

Another 15,000 UFCW members in other areas of Oregon and Southwest Washington will vote over the next two months. UFCW Local 555 declared that "a final decision will not be made until all votes from across the jurisdiction are aggregated."

Albertsons Companies operates Albertsons, Safeway, Vons and Pavilions stores, while the Fred Meyer, QFC and Ralphs stores are part of The Kroger Co.

Workers are demanding higher wages that keep up with the cost of living. One worker who emphasized her support to strike posted on social media that "wages aren't going to go up, but everything else will, including rent. 25 cents extra won't cut it. We need a living wage and Kroger doesn't care." Another grocery worker explained that he has been working for thirteen years, but "My W-2 [wage and tax statement] is almost the same as it was when I started."

The authorization in Portland comes less than two weeks after 46,000 workers at three of the largest supermarket chains in Southern California—Albertsons, Vons, and Ralphs—also voted to authorize a strike. A walkout would hit 532 stores, or more than 30 percent of supermarkets throughout the region, affecting some 24 million people.

The UFCW has kept the workers on the job since the expiration of their contract in March. Negotiations are scheduled to resume today and last through July 12. Due to the widespread support for a fight among workers, Teamsters Joint Council 42 announced that truck drivers would not deliver goods to the supermarkets in the event of a strike.

Although the supermarket giants are colluding to demand major wage and benefit concessions from workers, the UFCW has blocked any effort to unify grocery workers in

Southern California, the Pacific Northwest and other regions of the country, including New England, where 31,000 Stop & Shop workers struck for 11 days in April.

Portland workers have been kept in the dark about contract negotiations, which have been going on since May 2018. Despite Local 555 having had eleven bargaining meetings, not an ounce of information has been posted about the content of the negotiations. Workers have been told only to "wear their buttons" and to "remain in contact with each other."

Jeff Anderson, Secretary-Treasurer of UFCW Local 555, declared on the union's website that, "The working class in our country work too hard to be living in their cars and store break rooms. No one with a job (or two!) should be eligible for food stamps, and yet these employers pay so little that many UFCW members are put in the position of needing to access government benefits in order to feed their families. This is not the fault of those who are working incredibly hard to make ends meet. It's the fault of greedy corporations."

Such conditions are an indictment of the UFCW as much as the supermarket bosses. The fact is the UFCW has colluded with management to impose decades of concessions on grocery workers and it bears equal responsibility for the conditions, which compel workers to live in their cars and store breakrooms.

A 2010 study of southern California grocery workers showed that wages had declined by 12.6 percent over the previous decade, from \$12.97 to \$11.33 in 2010 dollars, while the percentage of food retail workers living in poverty rose from 43% in 1999 to 54% in 2010. The situation has only worsened since the financial crash of 2008 even as the profits and share values of the supermarket chains skyrocketed.

Nearly 16 years ago in 2003-2004, 71,000 UFCW grocery workers struck in southern California against the same three large supermarket chains. The 19-week strike was the longest work stoppage in the history of US supermarkets at the time. The Teamsters union forced its drivers to cross

picket lines and make deliveries to stores that operated on scab labor. Meanwhile the companies lost over \$1.5 billion in profits. Despite the powerful potential of grocery workers to have their demands met, the union agreed to a concession contract with deep reductions in salary, decreases in overtime pay from time and a half, to time plus one dollar. Additionally, personal days were cut, and employees would face longer wait times for employees to accrue vacation days and benefits.

Most recently, the UFCW shut down the strike of Stop & Shop workers and sent workers back to work even before they read, let alone voted, on the tentative agreement. The final deal raised health care deductibles and terminated defined benefit pension plans in exchange for 401K-style plans. During the walkout, the UFCW refused to pay out strike benefits in a deliberate move to starve workers into submission.

Workers are outraged over decades of union-backed concessions. One worker on the UFCW Local 555 page noted, "Going all the way back to 1972....there were no substantial wage gains from any strike. If a \$15.00hr 40 hr a week worker was on strike for 3 weeks = \$1800.00 loss in wages. If a resulting raise was .35 cents an hour it would take 128 weeks to re-coup just the losses. For those that need more, that is over 2 years. When will workers demand that Union staff not be paid during a strike?"

Another grocery worker posted, "History has shown when local 555 members strike they usually end up losing in the long run. Remember union reps and others working for the union continue to get paid. How dedicated to this strike are they really?"

While grocery workers are living in poverty, the UFCW International President Anthony Perrone pocketed \$341,398 in salary and disbursements in 2018, according to the financial report the union filed with the US Labor Department. This puts top union officials in the highest five percent of US income earners.

In order to conceal the fundamental class issues that all grocery workers face, the UFCW is seeking to define the struggle as a fight for pay "equity" between female and male workers. "The Women of 555 are Not Amused," declares the union's web site before declaring that "the most common male wage is 27% higher than the most common female wage."

The exploitation of all workers, women and male alike, is not caused by gender inequality but by capitalism. Even if the alleged pay gap were overcome, grocery workers would still be equally impoverished due to the long-standing collusion of the UFCW with the corporations. By focusing on gender, the UFCW only fosters divisions among workers instead of unifying all workers against the giant supermarket

chains, the Wall Street banks that stand behind them and the capitalist profit system, which is the source of exploitation and all forms of oppression.

This obsession with gender and race is central to the Democratic Party, which has a political stronghold over the state governments in California, Oregon and Washington. The Democrats, with the assistance of the unions, have overseen decades of attacks on workers even as they hand over billions in corporate tax cuts and other subsidies to Silicon Valley, Amazon and the aviation and defense industry.

The strike vote by supermarket workers is part of the growing mood of militancy of workers throughout the US and internationally. This includes strikes of teachers over the last year in Washington state, Los Angeles, Oakland and Union City, California. In every case, however, workers confront in the unions no less an enemy than the employers and the two corporate-controlled parties.

That is why grocery workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file strike committees to outline their own demands, link up with grocery workers throughout the West Coast and Pacific Northwest to launch a common strike, and reach out to teachers, autoworkers, and other workers to fight for joint action. This must be combined with a socialist political program, including the transformation of the giant supermarket chains into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

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