

UFCW claims “historic” Hormel contract ratified, while inflation will erode wage increases

George Gallanis
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Work in the meatpacking industry? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end of this article to tell us what your working conditions are like and what you are fighting for.

Last Thursday, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and Hormel Food Corp declared the ratification of a new four-year contract. Praising it as “historic,” the union had hastily presented the agreement, which includes below-inflation wages, a week earlier for workers to vote on.

Following two months of talks between the company and the union, which began on July 11, Hormel workers overwhelmingly rejected a four-year contract proposal last month.

The union bureaucracy, although it had told workers to vote the agreement down, nevertheless brought that contract to a vote to test the waters, see how workers would react, and keep workers from striking.

UFCW Local 663 then announced on Thursday, October 5 a new tentative agreement with Hormel, and urged workers to vote yes on it.

Releasing nothing of the contract’s contents to workers, the union waited until the following Sunday, the day before the contract vote, to give the rank and file self-serving highlights.

Workers voted on the tentative agreement on Monday, and union officials delayed publicly releasing the result until early Thursday morning. The UFCW declared a “historic” contract had been won. In reality it does not come close to recouping decades of lost wages.

Reviewing the scant details offered by the union—which also did not release a final vote tally—the contract includes a \$3-6 hourly increase through the entire four years.

A Hormel worker told the WSWWS that he would see a \$3 raise for the first year followed by \$.75, .50, and .50

cents for the remaining three years—barely a dent against inflation. Meanwhile, Hormel, a Fortune 500 global branded food company, paid its CEO Jim Snee \$7,489,188 last year, and hands shareholders millions yearly.

The union claims the contract protects healthcare, something the company should completely cover, given the stark hazards of meatpacking. As the National Employment Law Project recently noted, based on figures from the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration, some 27 packing industry workers per day suffer amputation or hospitalization.

Earlier this year, Dan Lenway, chief steward for UFCW Local 663, spoke to a Minnesota House labor committee hearing on the dangers of meatpacking. Giving an eyewitness account, he said of a worker, “The press got his two fingers and his thumb—1,800 pounds of pressure in that press totally crushed it. He was stuck in that press for a half hour before they could get him out of there,” Lenway said. “He was writhing in pain. I stood there and watched the whole thing. It was unbearable. Any of these injuries could have been and can be avoided.”

He added, “During my time at Hormel, I’ve seen injuries unfortunately become the norm in the meatpacking plants. Any of these injuries could have been and can be avoided. Management continues to run too fast, short-staffed—and corporate greed just doesn’t allow management to maintain machinery to protect our people.”

Such comments underscore the dangerous conditions. But the union, while making toothless appeals to state legislatures, kept meat plants open during the initial onslaught of the pandemic, leading to tens of thousands of infections and at least 200 deaths.

From this experience and past lessons must come a new

perspective and strategy for rank-and-file workers.

To guard against future betrayals and ensure workers' health and safety, workers must build rank-and-file committees. Lives are at stake, and workers cannot trust the union to protect them. Workers need to establish lines of communication among all plants and share safety concerns. Workers should organize actions to address unsafe working conditions.

There is nothing new in the betrayal of the UFCW. The backstabbing of the Hormel strike of 1985-86 by the UFCW bureaucracy set the deteriorating conditions of meatpacking workers into motion. As the WSWS recently explained, "The defeat of the Hormel workers in 1986 cleared the decks for a brutal counteroffensive against all the gains workers had made in a century of struggle, dating back to before Upton Sinclair's famous exposé of the industry, *The Jungle*."

Unions across each city, state, and country worldwide are engaged in preventing workers from fighting against the dictates of the corporations and bosses. But workers are on the move. From writers and actors to nurses and autoworkers, workers are overwhelmingly voting to go on strike and—if not sabotaged by their unions—are on strike.

Held back by the United Auto Workers (UAW), and despite voting by 97 percent to go on strike, the UAW has limited autoworkers to a mini "Stand Up" strike, which has seen only a handful of plants participate.

But autoworkers are fighting back. After voting down a contract signed off by UAW president Shawn Fain, 3,900 Mack Trucks workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Florida struck. Moreover, autoworker rank-and-file committees are taking the lead in informing workers how to fight back.

Hormel and meatpacking workers everywhere should study the history of the betrayal of the unions, particularly the UFCW, and draw the necessary conclusions, following the auto workers in establishing rank-and-file committees. A fightback can begin today with workers taking the initiative.



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