

California Food 4 Less grocery workers must reject UFCW's sellout agreement!

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30 June 2024

The WSWS is here to assist in the building of rank-and-file committees at every Food 4 Less and workplace. Fill out the form below for help setting up a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.

Approximately 6,000 Food 4 Less workers, covered by several locals in the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, are set to vote this week on a contract which they have not been allowed to review. The undemocratic vote, taking place on Monday and Tuesday, comes amid mounting frustrations among workers over poverty wages, safety concerns, deteriorating work conditions and a constant struggle for hours.

Food 4 Less workers generally make between \$16 to \$18 an hour in California, home to some of the highest costs of living in the country.

The tentative agreement between the UFCW and The Kroger Co. (Kroger), the monopolistic owner of supermarket chains including Food 4 Less, Vons, Ralphs, Dillons and others, comes after Food 4 Less workers voted overwhelmingly to approve a strike on June 14. They have continued working despite their contract expiring June 8.

The strike was subsequently called off last Tuesday after the UFCW bureaucracy announced a tentative agreement with Kroger, the day before a boycott rally at the Food 4 Less in Baldwin Park, Los Angeles.

For the majority of workers, the increases agreed upon in the tentative agreement are insignificant. The UFCW is working to sow divisions by offering slightly higher raises to workers who have topped out their hourly rates or are working in areas requiring additional skill, such as meat cutters, deli leads or head clerks.

If passed, UFCW is touting that as of November 4, 2024, starting wages will be above the state minimum wage of \$16 an hour by a measly \$0.30, with \$0.25 increases between steps after that. There are four pay scales that differ slightly for Los Angeles County, the city of Los Angeles, Pasadena and the remainder of California.

Within the agreement's California pay scale, the current starting rates are as low as \$16.10 per hour for Food 4 Less workers, even lower than Ralphs workers, despite both being owned by Kroger. The workers at the very bottom of the pay

scale will only see a 70—80 cent raise between now and the end of the contract.

A mid-range clerk currently making \$16.60 will receive a \$0.70 raise as of November 4, putting them at \$17.30. On January 1, 2025, that will increase by another \$1.30, bringing them to \$18.60. By January 2026, their wage will reach \$19.90, a poverty wage presently and whose value will have declined even further due to further inflation by the contract's end.

The increases are nothing close to achieving a living wage, especially after prices in most California metropolitan areas have risen by around 20 percent since the start of the UFCW contract in 2020. A living wage, or the amount necessary for a single worker to afford basic necessities, is now estimated to be about \$27 per hour at 40 hours of work per week in California.

A 20+ year worker in San Diego told the WSWS that she would be voting no on the tentative agreement:

I don't agree with what the union is offering and they also aren't fighting for more. And they sure as hell won't be giving us adequate strike pay if we were to go on strike. They are basically forcing us to vote for this because they know many of us can't afford to be on strike. They are only paying us for being on the pickets.

She explained that she went on strike at Ralph's 10 years ago, that they were out for five months, and it was brutal because they were paid only a fraction of their wages.

Another full-time Food 4 Less worker told the WSWS:

The new union president has gotten the most raises in the past couple of years. Ten years before that, we didn't get a raise, nothing. Now everything is so inflated, we can't live off our wages. I've worked here for 25 years and make \$2 more than a McDonald's worker.

Another worker, who had been working for Food 4 Less for

decades, said her wage currently tops out at about \$22 an hour and that the store refuses to schedule her for more than 24 hours a week or make her a full-time worker. “I can’t afford to live off this wage...I won’t be able to survive off the retirement plan they have either.”

The workers also have clear safety concerns, working in areas with high crime, and no measures being taken to protect workers. One worker showed the WSWS an image of a bullet hole in the store, from where a shooting had taken place a week prior.

Understaffing and hours are also a major issue. As the minimum wage in California slowly rises, corporations like Kroger are cutting weekly hours but increasing workloads. One worker told the WSWS that it has become almost impossible to get a full-time position, while another worker stocking shelves stated, “You can see it on my face. We get no respect from Food 4 Less.”

In a town hall hosted by the UFCW on Friday, UFCW 770 President Kathy Finn claimed that although not all that was sought was achieved in this “historic” deal, “the most important thing that was achieved was solidarity.” Finn’s most recent listed salary is \$186,000, but is likely higher in her new role as President of Local 770.

Despite the attempts by Finn and the UFCW bureaucracy to claim this deal is a historic win for the workers, nothing is settled until the workers themselves cast their votes on the contract, which they should rightfully vote to reject. The entire process—from what the UFCW is demanding, to the calling off of the strike, and the snap vote to push through the contract—is highly undemocratic.

In the town hall, workers demonstrated clear opposition to the presentation from Finn and the UFCW. Workers asked what happens if they reject the contract, while one worker commented, “The Union is having us settle for this! Don’t let them! Please vote NO!”

Adding insult to injury, the UFCW is dangling a miserly “ratification bonus” of either \$500, \$300 or \$150 depending on status, to exploit their poverty and incentivize workers to approve the deal in an attempt to prevent a fight for higher pay.

Conditions are emerging for a broader struggle uniting Food 4 Less workers with grocery workers and others across North America.

Currently, meatpacking workers in Ontario, Canada have rejected the concessionary deal brought to them by the UFCW and are entering into the fifth week of their strike demanding significantly higher wages. It is critical that Canadian meatpacking workers link up with their counterparts in California and throughout the US who are struggling for higher wages and better working conditions. This will require a rebellion against the UFCW apparatus, which is seeking to isolate and suppress each of these struggles.

Kroger reported over \$3 billion in profit in 2023 and over \$4 billion in 2022. But the UFCW pedals the lie that only an

insignificant wage increase can be won despite being underpaid for decades. This is because the UFCW and the trade union bureaucracies are working for the corporations and the ruling class, primarily the Democratic Party.

In response to this, workers must build their own fighting organizations, rank-and-file committees democratically run by workers themselves to ensure their interests are genuinely represented.

These committees of coworkers must be entirely independent of the union bureaucracy and their first order of business should be organizing a powerful Vote No campaign against this contract.

The UFCW has rubber-stamped and continues to accept poverty wages because the bureaucracy is loyal to the corporations and the ruling class, which is organizing all of society towards total war. This requires increased exploitation of workers and worsening working conditions, all while no expense is spared to fund imperialist war.

In April, Biden approved a \$95 billion dollar war bill to fund the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, for the Israeli military in its assault on Gaza and to fund Taiwanese military bases as part of the US preparations against its economic rival China.

By rejecting the inadequate deal and organizing through rank-and-file committees, workers can begin taking control of their own struggle and fight for the demands of workers, not what the UFCW claims is possible.

This independent path forward is required for workers to be able to reject inadequate deals and push for substantial improvements in their working conditions. By building a movement that prioritizes workers’ needs over corporate profits and the union bureaucracy, the working class can begin to challenge worsening conditions imposed by the capitalist system which prioritizes profits and extreme wealth for a tiny minority.

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