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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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30.07.2022

## ***Kroger workers in Columbus, Ohio overwhelmingly reject pro-company contract***

*Are you a Kroger worker in Columbus? We want to hear from you! Fill out the form at the bottom of this page to tell us what you think about the contract and what you think you should be fighting for. All comments will be kept anonymous.*

Kroger workers in the Columbus, Ohio area decisively rejected a sellout contract endorsed by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1059. Results came in late Wednesday night with 874 votes in favor and 2,128 against, roughly 71 percent of those who voted. However, UFCW is refusing to call a strike and is instead extending the previous contract while it hashes out a second deal with Kroger management.



Kroger store sign (Wikimedia Commons)

The base pay increase over the three years would only have been 65 cents in the first year and 50 cents in the last two years; top pay would have increased for clerks from \$17.10 to only \$18.25.

Worse yet, the contract also would have completely changed the progression system, with “red circled” senior employees elevated to \$17.75 an hour and reaching a top pay of \$18.75 at the end of the contract. New workers would be brought on at \$14.25 an hour, compared to \$12 under the previous agreement. But new workers would have to wait an entire year before receiving a wage increase. Before, workers received raises at established intervals throughout the contract.

It also drastically altered the pay scale so that workers would not be able to rise to higher tiers unless they worked a weekly average of 34 hours over an entire year. If they did not, either due to a leave of absence or to deliberate scheduling by management, workers could be brought down a pay scale or fail to even make it out of the lowest tier. But even if workers did qualify to move up another tier, they would not see that pay rise until January 2024.

Workers were also incensed by a clause that would have increased the ability of third party vendors to stock shelves. The vague wording of the contract implied that Kroger would be able to use third party vendors as strike breakers, weakening the position of workers in the event of a strike.

Opposition among workers developed rapidly as soon as the details of the contract were released. It barely increased worker pay over the three-year deal. There was widespread anger at the UFCW for bringing the deal to a vote, and many workers accused the union, correctly, of acting on behalf of management.

The UFCW announced the results on Facebook late last night in a tersely worded social media statement. Responding to a separate statement by Kroger management that it was “disappointed” in the outcome, one worker replied, “When a company is disappointed that the union contract didn’t go as they wanted, it’s almost always a good thing.”

Another commented, “sounds like we need a new union and bargaining committee.”

One former Kroger worker also responded, “Thank you to all of my former co workers for giving the finger to [UFCW Local 1059] and Rodney [McMullen].” Another said, “Our success today doesn’t mean we’re out of the woods yet but hopefully this shows how serious we are and how disgruntled we’re getting from the slashed hours and poverty wages while celebrating record profits and corporate bonuses! We deserve a cut of the cake too!”

Workers also spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* in the aftermath of the vote. “We did it! Time for round two,” one worker said, jubilated. Another worker suggested a high turnout at his store: “Seems like a lot of people voted. The box felt full. Here is hoping we get a better contract.”

Another added, “The contract from UFCW 1059 is so pathetic. It does not reflect the so-called appreciation and integrity Kroger claims. I would have no problem striking if it came to that. The union is not working for us employees at all.”

A worker with 12 years service said, “They never should have brought us the contract. The union doesn’t care about us, they just want our dues. Prices are skyrocketing. My rent was raised by \$300 a month last year; how am I supposed to afford that when my wages go up 65 cents?”

“Kroger is making millions, and they don’t want to pay their employees a living wage. The politicians don’t care about us. They just care about the rich. Biden says he’s for the unions, but that doesn’t mean he’s for the workers. We should all come together in a powerful strike.”

Columbus workers were also urged by workers in Indianapolis to vote down the deal, which broadly resembled one which the UFCW forced through there earlier in the month after an earlier deal was rejected. The announcement of the ratification in Indianapolis sparked widespread outrage among workers, who accused the union of ballot fraud. In response, Local 700 deleted its entire Facebook page, depriving workers of a forum to voice their anger.

In a statement last week, the Kroger Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded by Indianapolis Kroger workers to oppose the sellout by the UFCW, called on Columbus

workers to reject the contract. “You will have the support of workers all over the region, country and world for your struggles. From industrial workers in the states of Ohio, Michigan and Indiana, to rail workers worldwide, to striking Sri Lankan workers who forced the resignation of their corrupt president, you have the support of the global working class behind you,” the statement read.

However, the statement also warned, “Columbus workers cannot leave this struggle in the hands of the UFCW! The union bureaucrats are backed by the corporations and their powerful financial interests. They will block every effort to reform it in order to maintain their privileges, such as the six-figure salaries that top officials are paid through our union dues and the control of the massive strike fund.” In response, the committee called on Columbus workers to build a committee in their city to link up with Kroger workers nationwide and “form essential lines of communication across stores and different regions, capable of challenging both the corrupt UFCW bureaucracy and Kroger management.”

This warning is now being confirmed by the fact that the UFCW has extended the previous contract in response to the vote and is refusing to call a strike. Not a single worker voted to authorize this course of action. The UFCW is following the playbook established in Indianapolis earlier in the month, when it also refused to call a strike and justified using an arbitrary rule requiring a contract to be rejected by a two-thirds majority before a strike can be called.

The way forward is through the development of a rank-and-file committee to establish democratic control over the entire process by workers themselves. In the first place, workers must organize to demand the immediate calling of a strike vote. The bargaining committee which brought the contract which workers rejected must be thrown out and replaced by one elected from the rank and file, and all future bargaining sessions must be livestreamed to ensure accountability.

**World Socialist 29.07.2022**