

A warning to California grocery workers: Trumka, AFL-CIO preparing final act in betrayal

Andrea Peters, Rafael Azul
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The AFL-CIO's intervention into the strike by grocery workers in southern California should be understood as a sign that the leadership of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) is preparing its final act in the betrayal of the three-and-half-month-old struggle by employees at four major supermarket chains to defend their wages and health benefits.

The UFCW is hailing AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka's involvement as the initiation of a renewed effort to beat back the demands of the grocery stores. In fact, the opposite is true. The maneuvers that have been devised under Trumka—"pray-ins" outside the house of one of the supermarket executives, demonstrations at stock-holders meetings, and demands that pension funds not buy the supermarkets' stocks—amount to little more than stunts that have nothing in common with a serious effort to shut down the supermarkets. These pathetic gestures are intended to divert workers' attention from the underhanded role that the union bureaucracy has played in the strike thus far and to prepare the rank and file for a settlement on management's terms.

The Socialist Equality Party issues this warning to the 70,000 striking and locked-out grocery workers: time is running short to avert a devastating defeat. Workers must organize a struggle against the strategy and tactics of the UFCW and AFL-CIO bureaucrats and mobilize the rank and file to take control of the strike. This includes the creation of a negotiating team elected directly by the workers, an end to all closed-door negotiations with the supermarkets, the initiation of an immediate campaign to stop strikebreaking, the institution of mass picketing, and the issuing of calls for sympathy strikes from workers in other sections of industry. Such a fight can only succeed on the basis of a completely new political strategy—one that defends the working class as a whole from the onslaught against their living standards by both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Since the outset of the strike against Vons, Pavillions, Ralphs, and Albertsons supermarkets, the UFCW leadership has undermined the struggle of the grocery workers.

* The union has done nothing throughout the course of the

strike to stop the supermarkets' strikebreaking through the use of scab labor at the stores and distribution centers.

* On October 31, the UFCW pulled down the pickets at Ralphs, maintaining that this would put increased pressure on the other chains to settle. This claim was made despite the fact that all four of the grocery chains are sharing profits over the course of the strike. The removal of the pickets at Ralphs only served to weaken the workers' struggle. Furthermore, it came under conditions in which there was widespread public support for the strike, with little traffic in the stores.

* After weeks in which it refused to organize pickets at the supermarket distribution centers, the UFCW instituted lines at the warehouses only to pull them down three week later.

* At the end of last year, the health benefits of the membership were allowed to expire without the union undertaking any measures to prevent the loss of coverage.

* In January, strike benefits for picketers were cut between \$100 and \$150 a week, reducing strike pay by 50 percent or more at six out of the seven southern California locals.

* For the last three and a half months, the workers have been kept completely in the dark about the course and progress of negotiations with the grocery chains.

* In December, the union made a concessionary offer that would have saved the grocery chains just under \$400 million over the course of the contract.

The AFL-CIO's intervention in the strike, in the form of Trumka's arrival, is the logical culmination of these tactics. He has a long history of betraying workers' struggles. In the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, as head of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), he implemented a corporatist policy of labor-management relations that, in the name of improving productivity and reducing labor costs, led to the widespread destructions of jobs and the operation of non-union mines. Among the concessions granted by Trumka was the weakening of the principle of the 8-hour day. Under his stewardship, UMWA membership declined from 120,000 to 30,000 active members in the span of 13 years, transforming what had once been one of the most militant and powerful unions in the United States into a hollow shell of its former self.

Most recently, in California in December 2002, Trumka played the central role in selling out the locked-out longshore workers represented by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The contract hammered out under his supervision resulted in the elimination of hundreds of jobs through technological changes, while preserving a position for the union bureaucracy in the implementation of all future technologies at the docks.

If the UFCW feels free to parade Trumka before the rank and file as a militant figure, it is because workers are not familiar with the recent history of labor struggles and have not yet assimilated the lessons of more than two decades of betrayals and defeats presided over by labor leaders such as Trumka. At the same time, Trumka's intervention in the grocery strike is an expression of the UFCW leadership's arrogance and contempt for the rank and file.

The tactics chosen by the UFCW throughout the course of the strike are not the result of either a lack of resolve on the part of the membership or the absence of support among wide layers of working and middle class people in southern California. As is evidenced by the continued willingness of the general public to observe the picket lines at Vons, Pavillions, and Albertsons, the efforts by the UFCW workers to prevent the supermarkets from gutting their health care benefits and instituting a massive reduction in wages resonates widely with the economic pressures faced by millions of people.

With the state's economy continuing to flounder and the most right-wing administrations in US and California history holding office in both Washington and Sacramento, the hostility of masses of ordinary Californians to the ceaseless drive for profits by big business has only been exacerbated by the mounting impact of widespread budget cuts in social programs at the state and federal levels. An alternative strategy to that taken by the UFCW—one based on calls for mass picketing, solidarity strike actions, and a political demand for the creation of high-quality fully-government funded health care for all—could have garnered mass support.

However, the UFCW leadership chose not to undertake such a strategy because it is fundamentally concerned with protecting its own narrow interests. With leading representatives of southern California locals pulling in well over \$200,000 a year in salaries and expense accounts—Richard Icaza of Los Angeles local 770 drew in approximately \$275,000 of compensation in 2003—the union bureaucracy has nothing in common with the average worker whose salary ranges between \$12 and \$14 an hour. In so far as their own salaries, perks, and privileges depend upon protecting the profitability of the grocery chains from outside competitors, the union leadership works to suppress the industrial strength of the workers and subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party.

Undoubtedly, the competitive pressure felt by the grocery chains from “superstores” such as Wal-Mart—which operate

globally and pay poverty wages, provide little or no health insurance, demand longer hours, and offer no significant retirement benefits—is quite intense. What this competition and the effort of Alberstons, Vons, Pavillions, and Ralphs to impose similar conditions on their own workers demonstrate is that the most elementary interests and needs of workers have come into an ever more open and irreconcilable conflict with the profit drives of big business. While in earlier periods the working class was able to negotiate certain concessions through national trade union struggles that targeted corporations bound by the limits of their own country's borders, in today's global economy it is impossible to defend the interests of the workers with such a strategy.

Only on the basis of a strategy that rejects the dictates of private property and the demands of corporations for profitability can the needs of the working class be met. However, such an orientation demands not just an economic but a political struggle—one rooted in a complete break with the Democratic Party and the launching of a fight to build a mass independent political party of the working class committed to socialist principles. The trade union leadership however, is completely hostile to this. It can therefore only play a treacherous role in the struggles of the workers that it purportedly represents, betraying strikes and adamantly supporting the policies of the Democratic Party.

The struggle of the grocery workers in southern California can only be won on the basis of a break with the strategies, tactics, and policies of the trade union bureaucracy. This includes the creation of new organs of industrial action directly and democratically controlled by the rank and file itself, the return of the picket lines to Ralphs, the setting up of pickets at all distribution centers, warehouses, and other facilities used by the supermarkets, the holding of mass demonstrations, and the implementation of sympathy strikes by union and non-union workers in other sections of industry. Above all however, workers must end their subordination to the Democratic Party and build a new independent party of the working class that fights for socialist principles.



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