

Members Mobilize for Tough

Health Care, Scheduling, Other Issues At Stake

Employer Greed Biggest Obstacle

Local 400 members working at Giant and Safeway are mobilizing for what could be a long, challenging, fierce battle for a new collective bargaining agreement. The current contract expires on October 31, 2013, and based on recent negotiations between UFCW Local Unions and these grocery chains, the bargaining might not be resolved by then.

Members and stewards have been attending a series of meetings being held to determine members' priorities in a new contract, to organize actions to galvanize customers and community allies in the workers' cause, and to prepare members for a lengthy, difficult fight.

The bargaining takes place at a time when both Safeway and Royal Ahold (owner of the Giant banner) are earning healthy profits and expanding. Safeway CEO Steven A. Burd took home \$11.3 million in total compensation in 2012—more than any other retail food industry executive—while Ahold CEO Dick Boer made \$3.1 million (2.4 million Euros).

But despite these obscene levels of prosperity, both companies have been seeking to squeeze ever-greater profits out of their workers by demanding givebacks at the bargaining table, and showing no recognition of the fact that those profits only come because of the hard work of their employees.

Further complicating matters is the harsh impact of the Affordable Care Act on multiemployer Taft-Hartley health and welfare funds like those that provide health coverage to Local 400 members. This is increasing costs and adding another roadblock in the way of achieving strong collective bargaining agreements.

"Just like with Kroger-Roanoke, this is going to be a very tough round of bargaining," said Local 400 President Mark P. Federici. "What it comes down to is a fight between corporate greed and workers' needs.

"Our members need to understand the environment in which this bargaining is taking place," Federici explained. "The attitude in corporate boardrooms these days is to maximize profits at all costs, to enrich themselves and their shareholders, and to treat workers not as their most valuable asset, but as a cost to be driven down to the lowest possible level. This

is true in California, where Safeway is headquartered, and in the Netherlands where Ahold executives call the shots. And looking at the bigger picture, it's why income inequality in our society is greater than it's ever been.

"Adding to the challenge are the growing cost of our health plans due to the Affordable Care Act, the still-struggling economy, the need to maintain retirement security, and the presence of non-union competitors—one of which, Martins, happens to be an Ahold banner," he said.

"We must be fully mobilized for this fight," Federici emphasized, "because it's going to take every weapon in our arsenal to get the kind of agreement our members deserve. We must be ready for anything. And we must be ready to do whatever it takes."

Bargaining Priorities

One of the greatest current problems cited by members is inconsistent and inadequate scheduling, with workers not receiving enough hours or getting switched around at the last minute. This can make it impossible for members to plan their lives, and inconsistency in hours

from week to week also wreaks havoc with family budgets.

As a result, there has been a large increase in the number of scheduling grievances filed in recent months. Fixing the schedul-



Local 400 President Mark P. Federici discusses the challenges of upcoming bargaining.



Local 400 Secretary-Treasurer Lavis "Mikki" Harris speaks to Giant and Safeway stewards.

Giant-Safeway Contract Fight



Giant and Safeway shop stewards listen to a presentation on the impact of the Affordable Care Act on their health and welfare fund.



Members meet in small groups to plan their bargaining strategy.

ing mess, ensuring that full-time employees get their hours, and stopping possible employer attempts to switch workers from full-time to part-time status will be major objectives in bargaining.

Maintaining health and retirement security will also be key goals. But achieving them will be more difficult because, as has been noted elsewhere, the Affordable Care Act imposes taxes on Taft-Hartley Funds for the exclusive benefit of for-profit insurance companies, while denying workers the subsidies available for participants in other health plans. The health care law also creates financial incentives for employers to move workers to part-time status—working fewer than 30 hours a week—to deny them any coverage at all.

“Health insurance is the biggest issue, especially with the part-time people,” said Maria Gomez, a shop steward and meat cutter at Giant #799 in Leesburg, Va. “It’s big for everyone.”

Sharon Glaser, a shop steward and food clerk at Safeway #1956 in Rockville, Md., cited health care, pensions, severance, wages and benefits as key priorities. “We all have to understand the proposals, get involved and be ready to fight until the very end,” she said. “It’s our contract and it affects how we work, how we live and how we pay our bills.”

Bargaining Difficulties Elsewhere

In the Seattle metropolitan area, members of UFCW Local 21, UFCW Local 367 and Teamsters Local 38 recently authorized a strike against Safeway, Fred Meyer, QFC and Albertsons. The vote was overwhelming, with 98 percent in support.

The strike authorization came after more than six months of negotiations, including 12 bargaining sessions, had resulted in no progress. Safeway and the other grocers have refused to budge from proposals to deny health care coverage to employees working less than 30 hours a week, deny workers paid sick

days, and cut pay, including for holiday work.

“My parents have been grocery workers my entire life,” said Ariana Davis, who works at Safeway in Washington state. “Losing health care for our family would not only hurt my family, but the other 30,000 grocery store workers. I don’t think kids should ever have to worry if their parents can afford medical bills, medicine or dental care.”

At the time this article was written, it was unclear whether the strike authorization vote would lead to a work stoppage or force a breakthrough in bargaining. For the latest on the status of these negotiations, please visit the UFCW International Union’s website at www.ufcw.org.

The most recent large-scale Ahold negotiations were also extremely difficult. Workers at UFCW Locals 328, 371, 919, 1445 and 1459 at Ahold banner Stop & Shop in New England endured months of tough bargaining—and management scare tactics, including Stop & Shop placing ads to hire replacement workers in the case of a strike or lockout—before they were able to reach agreement.

It took unprecedented solidarity among the five locals and a willingness to craft creative solutions that invest resources back into workers’ paychecks to succeed. Their contract includes wage increases, protections for part-time workers, and the continuation of health benefits.

“There’s no sugar-coating any of this,” Federici said. “It’s not going to be easy and it may not be pretty. But if we stick together, like our brothers and sisters in New England and the Pacific Northwest, and we fight with all the tenacity we have, I am confident that in the end, we’ll get ourselves a fair and decent agreement.”

For the latest information on Giant/Safeway bargaining, please visit www.occupygiantandsafeway.org or www.ufcw400.org.