

Grocery worker union locals call meetings to prepare for picketing

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As the labor talks continue between Southern California's major grocery stores and the union representing 62,000 of their workers, some of the union locals are taking yet another step to prepare for a potential strike.

At least two of the region's United Food and Commercial Workers locals -- UFCW 324 in Buena Park and UFCW 770 in Los Angeles -- are holding meetings for stewards and picket captains next week to outline and clarify the roles union members would play on a picket line.

In an email sent this week to union members, officials from UFCW Local 324 wrote that its meeting on Thursday was being held "due to the lack of progress at negotiations and the managements' insistence on take away proposals.... We will provide negotiation update and prepare for your role as picket captains."

Ralphs said it was prepared, though it declined to discuss details. Representatives from Albertsons and Vons could not be reached for comment Thursday.

"While we have a plan in place, we remain hopeful that we will reach an agreement," said Kendra Doyel, a spokeswoman for Ralphs.

This week, the grocery chains presented the union with an initial proposal for changes and cuts to workers' healthcare coverage -- a proposal the retailers called "reasonable" and union officials described as "gutting."

Both sides are trying to come up with a new contract to replace the one that was set to expire March 6 and is being extended day to day. The labor negotiations are ongoing. A federal mediator was brought in last month and has been meeting with both sides.

-- P.J. Huffstutter

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