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## Grocery contract talks going slowly as deadline nears

**Three Southland supermarket chains have not yet made a contract proposal, and only four days of meetings have been held. The contract, which covers 62,000 workers, ends Sunday. A strike does not appear imminent.**

By P.J. Huffstutter, Los Angeles Times

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Three days before a key labor contract expires, negotiations between a grocery workers union and three of the region's leading supermarket chains are going slowly. The sluggish pace has workers recalling memories of protracted talks that led them to the picket lines seven years ago.

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The contract covers about 62,000 grocery workers in Southern California, including those employed by Ralphs, which is owned by Kroger Co.; Safeway Inc., which owns Vons and Pavilions stores; and Albertsons, which is owned by SuperValu Inc. The current contract ends Sunday night.

So far, the retailers have not made a contract proposal to the seven United Food and Commercial Workers locals whose union members work at the chains.

As of Thursday afternoon, no extension of the contract had been agreed upon, said Rick Icaza, president of UFCW Local 770 in Los Angeles. Icaza said that his local has been advising workers to prepare for the worst. But a strike at this point does not appear imminent and is something that union leaders said they want to avoid.

Icaza said that he and area union officials have been seeking meetings with the chains' negotiators since early January, but the supermarkets have agreed to meet only six times before the deadline.

The two sides met for four days last month at a hotel in Orange County, Icaza said, but little was accomplished.

"This is a complicated contract, and unlike last time, there's no sense of urgency," Icaza said. "Instead, they're talking about setting up meeting times after the contract has expired.... Our goal is to maintain what we have."

Kendra Doyle, a spokeswoman for Ralphs, said that negotiations take time and that the companies have been negotiating in good faith. She said Ralphs' management would continue to discuss "a number of topics including a contract extension."

Daymond W. Rice, director of public affairs and government relations for Vons, said the retailers wanted to reach "an agreement that makes sense economically for our employees and for the companies."

Mike Siemienas, spokesman for SuperValu, said that the company has "got complex issues to think and talk about, and we're committed to working with the union to reach a fair agreement."

The federal National Labor Relations Act requires employers to bargain in good faith until the contract ends. After that, either side has the option to walk away from the negotiations, said Katie Quan, associate chair of the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education.

Quan said it has become common nationwide for employer-employee negotiations to stretch out for months and for union employees to continue working without a contract amid protracted talks.

More than 2,000 housekeepers, food and beverage workers and other hourly workers at the Disneyland Hotel, the Grand Californian Hotel and the Paradise Pier Hotel in Anaheim have been working for nearly three years without a contract. California Correctional Peace Officers Assn., a 32,000-member union, has been working for four years without a contract.

"A lot of these negotiations go on way past the expiration, because neither side is willing to experience a walkout or a strike," Quan said.

Historically, negotiations between the region's leading grocers and the UFCW have been contentious.

In 2003 and 2004, a bitter debate over wages and healthcare benefits led to a strike and worker lockout that affected 852 California grocery stores for 141 days.

The settlement entailed union workers' agreeing to pay more for their healthcare and accepting a two-tier system under which new hires earned less per hour and received skimpier health benefits than grocery veterans. But the strike ultimately hurt both the retailers and the labor unions. Profits and the stock prices of all three retailers fell afterward.

Industry researchers have shown that, in the wake of the strike, competition increased with new entrants such as Tesco's Fresh & Easy chain and expansion by big-box retailers including Wal-Mart. Some consumers in Southern California altered their shopping patterns. Smaller chains and independents, including Trader Joe's, Food 4 Less and Gelson's enjoyed a boost of business from shoppers looking for deals, grocery analysts said.

Union members, too, said they were not prepared to be out of work for so long. Before the strike and worker lockout, Southern California grocery workers had been among the best-paid in the country. But the two-tiered contract caused resentment among some newer hires. Staffing turnover rates grew.

In 2007, negotiations between the two sides dragged on more than six months and resulted in, among other things, the grocers rolling back the two-tier wage system and shorter waits for health insurance for new employees and their families.

Now, grocery workers say they are hopeful that such protracted negotiations can be avoided. Yet some say they are preparing for the worst-case scenario — a strike — just in case.

Lorraine Imperial, a checker at a Vons market in the Palmdale area, has worked at grocery stores for 35 years. She's hoping the negotiations will go smoothly and end quickly. But the memories of the strike seven years ago remain painfully fresh.

She recalled that she had saved enough to be out of work for 30 days. It was far from enough. Halfway through the lockout, she said, she started accepting donations of food from friends to help feed herself and her family.

This time, she started socking away money in savings months ago. In January, she and co-workers started wearing buttons on their uniform. They simply read, "March 2011: Unite Now for Victory."

"We've been told by the union not to let our guard down and to be ready in case anything happens," said Imperial, the union steward of the store. "I don't want to be ready for something like that again. But we need to hang on to the good jobs we have. Other people agree with me. We don't want to fight, but we will if we're forced to."

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