

The Pueblo Chieftain

'From heroes to zeros': Grocery store employees seek return of hazard pay as COVID-19 ramps up

Alexis Smith - The Pueblo Chieftain

Grocery store workers belonging to United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7 made their case Wednesday for reinstating hazard pay and safety protocols during COVID-19.

They were joined by union leadership, **Coloradans for the Common Good**, faith leaders and the family member of a worker killed by COVID-19 for a virtual press conference to address the conditions grocery store employees throughout the state are facing.

"Our members, your employees, are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19, yet these heroes are being denied the Hero Pay you awarded them at the beginning of the pandemic," Kim Cordova, UFCW Local 7 president, wrote in a letter to Kroger CEO Rodney McMullen. "Kroger's employees went from 'heroes to zeros.'

In March, Albertsons Companies announced hazard pay for all associates who worked for the pandemic, calling it "Appreciation Pay," and days later Kroger followed suit, coining "Hero Pay."

"Local 7 as well as UFCW International felt this was fair and showed our members that these companies valued their sacrifice," said Melissa McCollister, political liaison for UFCW Local 7. "Unfortunately, as the pandemic raged on and stores became even more dangerous — both companies stripped workers of this."

Since the hazard pay was dropped in June, McCollister added, there has been a 735% increase in positive COVID-19 cases in Kroger stores and a 1,285% increase in Albertsons and Safeway stores.

UFCW Local 7 represents 25,000 members in supermarkets, packing houses, food processing plants and health care facilities, along with barbers and cosmetologists, in Colorado and Wyoming. UFCW represents members of two Kroger chains — King Soopers and City Market — along with Albertsons Companies stores Albertsons and Safeway.

The union is getting support from Coloradans for the Common Good, a broad-based organization comprised of local institutions including congregations, unions, educational institutions and nonprofits.

“Leaders of CCG are here today out of our concern for grocery store workers who are essential workers and have been a particular risk during this pandemic,” Marilyn Winokur of CCG said. “We believe we need to do everything in our power to protect them and our communities while they continue to work.”

Winokur noted that CCG wrote letters to both Steve Burnham, president of King Soopers, and Todd Broderick, president of the Denver Division of Albertsons Companies, to ask for a meeting to discuss the concerns surrounding grocery store employees.

In both cases, Winokur said, the requests for a meeting were declined.

Kris Staaf, senior director of public affairs and government relations for Albertsons and Safeway said in an email that “the health and safety of our associates and customers has been a priority through the pandemic.”

Staaf outlined various ways in which Safeway has worked to protect employees and customers, including utilizing social distancing stickers on aisle floors; daily safety compliance, coaching and training; installing health kiosks that screen associates; working with local health departments; offering curbside and home delivery at most locations; and recently introducing contactless payments at checkout stands and one-touch checkouts at fuel centers.

Staaf said the stores implemented plexi-glass protectors and have limited capacities for customers.

“We are deeply grateful for how our frontline associates have continued to serve their neighbors throughout 2020,” Staaf said in the email. “In thanks, Albertsons Companies paid a Frontline Hero Award last week to all eligible store, distribution center and manufacturing plant associates.”

Staaf said the reward will be equal to \$5 per hour for weekly average hours worked between Sep. 6 and Nov. 28.

The Pueblo Chieftain reached out to Kroger but did not receive comment by deadline.

Rep. Jason Crow, D-Colo., attended the Wednesday news conference from Washington D.C., where he said he is pushing to help pass a stimulus deal or relief bill that would secure hazard pay for essential workers.

“My voice is by far not the most important here,” Crow said. “I am here to show support for the frontline workers, the people that are working day and night to keep this country going.

“If this pandemic has shown us anything, it has shown us who really makes this country run.”

McCollister said grocery store workers have not just been let down by their employers, but also by “our broken Department of Labor.” She said after two grocery store union

members from a downtown King Soopers store in Denver died from contracting the virus from work and many members fell ill, Local 7 filed an OSHA complaint and grievance.”

McCollister noted that during the investigation, OSHA never sent a team member in-person saying, “The irony was not lost on us. The same stores that our members work at every day were too dangerous for government employees to investigate.”

On Dec. 10, OSHA sent a letter concluding its investigation, saying it was issuing a hazard alert letter to the store with no citation.

Marlon Johnson and Maricela Guzman, two King Soopers employees, and Sandy Chavez, a Safeway employee, all said they did not feel safe going into their respective workplaces because management does not enforce mask wearing and social distancing or monitor traffic flow. They noted that sanitation is not performed regularly, their stores have been understaffed and the managers do not inform associates when an employee has been exposed to the virus.

Nikki Trujillo was present to represent her brother, Randy Narvaes, who was a King Soopers employee for 30 years before he died after contracting COVID-19 at work.

“I never want another family to feel the pain his absence has left us, especially now during the holiday season,” Trujillo said, noting that her family doesn't want to hurt Kroger's business because that would hurt the workers.

But she said Kroger continues to put its workers at risk as stores get even more crowded during the holidays at the same time spread of the virus is exploding.

“We have clear guidance from the health authorities, and Kroger knows what procedures to put in place to help keep workers, customers, and our communities safe,” Trujillo said.

Both CCG and UFCW Local 7 noted the two main asks are for stores to reinforce hazard pay and safety measures to keep workers, customers and communities safe.

“We just want to sit down with the company and actually bargain for appreciation pay for the workers who are making all of the money for them,” McCollister said.