



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Stop Kroger's grocery shut-downs: 'It's all about greed'

written by John Parker
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Los Angeles — Kroger is the largest supermarket chain in the country. During the pandemic the company increased its profits by 56%, to \$2.6 billion, while its workers risked their health and their lives to serve their communities.

So when the chain decided to close down five stores in the Los Angeles area, simply because the City Council voted to give the workers a temporary \$5-per-hour pay increase — in recognition of their courageous service and added needs during the pandemic — the community and the workers were understandably outraged.

Ronald Ford, a worker at the Kroger-owned Ralphs grocery store located in South Central LA, represented by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770, said of the scheduled closure: "After 32 years working in this store, I see it's all about greed, it's never enough! Kroger should keep this store going. Don't shut it down, people need jobs. Hazard pay is a blessing for me."

Joe Crosby, president of the Harvard Boulevard Block Club, a South Central

neighborhood association, reflected on the planned closing of that store: “My brother works at the Ralphs that’s closing. And our neighbors have already been hurt by a Ralphs that closed one block away a few years ago.

“We now have people here who are no longer able to get good food at a decent price, and it severely affects our people who are elderly and those who can’t get around as easily, and many people here depended on those jobs,” Crosby told Struggle-La Lucha.

“They can’t keep closing these stores just because they’re too greedy to share the huge profits they made during this pandemic.”

The Ralphs on Crenshaw Boulevard in South Central was the first store focused on by a newly-formed coalition of community groups. They held a protest April 3 in solidarity with the workers and to inform the community about Kroger’s plans to close the store in May.

Building labor/community solidarity

The Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice began planning the action there in mid-March and circulated announcements about the event at various union rallies and community gatherings. One of those flyers landed in a City Council staffer’s lap, and he immediately called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which, unbeknownst to the Tubman Center, was also planning an action against the closures at another location.

The SCLC got in touch with the Tubman Center organizers, whom they had worked with previously. Both organizations were excited about the possibility of working together and bringing in other community groups.

At a planning meeting, the Tubman Center and SCLC were able to form a powerful coalition with the Baptist Ministers Conference of Southern California and local

neighborhood organizations, the Families of Park Mesa Heights, Hyde Park Organizational Partnership for Empowerment and Harvard Boulevard Block Club, along with Unión del Barrio, Ground Game LA, Socialist Unity Party, LA Black Worker Center and United Workers Assembly.

The coalition also included a very powerful ally - UFCW Local 770 - and it was this labor/community partnership that was able to secure the jobs of the workers at the store with just the threat of a demonstration.

Ludmila Blanco, staffer at the union, told coalition members at a subsequent virtual planning meeting that management at the Ralphs said, a day before the demonstration, that even if the store closes the workers would be transferred and not lose their jobs. Previously they were scheduled for layoffs. A partial victory, and also a testament to the power of working-class unity.

SCLC organizer Alison Featherstone told the growing crowd at the beginning of the April 3 rally at Ralphs: "We are so glad to be able to help bring all of these organizations together. We need to keep the momentum going to keep the store open and save the jobs of the 80 workers here."

As to what the store managers were doing while the rally was taking place, Joe Crosby told SLL, "During the demonstration my brother told me the bosses were looking out the windows scared as hell."

Another action was held on April 8 at a Food 4 Less scheduled for closure in East Hollywood, where a majority Latinx community will be affected. At this rally, organized by the union, managers didn't have to look out the windows: Union members and the coalition of community organizations marched through the store, chanting "Save our store!", right to the manager's office.

As with the previous action, shoppers were shocked to hear the news of the closure

and expressed the hardship that this would place on their families during the pandemic.

Expanding food deserts

Closing these supermarkets will leave working-class communities, especially Black and Brown communities, with even less access to quality, fresh, affordable food, exacerbating the epidemic of “food deserts” littered with mostly unhealthy fast food and more expensive smaller grocery stores.

Given their importance to the community, many are asking what right Kroger has to take away these stores in the first place. “If the politicians were serious, they would consider using the law of Eminent Domain to keep these stores running and in the community,” said a speaker at the Ralphs rally.

Although Kroger’s chains here are frequented by the community and often packed, Kroger argues that the stores they are shutting down are now unprofitable. This, of course, ignores the \$2.6 billion in profit Kroger made just since the beginning of the pandemic — the equivalent of two Fortune 500 companies — and the fact that the \$5 wage increase they blame is only temporary, lasting a few months.

As one protest sign said: “What’s \$2.6 Billion minus \$5?”

But even if Kroger’s specious claims were true, some believe that profit should not negate the more important needs of the community.

Pastor William D Smart, co-chair of the Ralphs rally and president of the SCLC in Los Angeles, declared, “This store, slated to be closed, would create a food desert in this area.

“They are lying about this store not being profitable. The people need this store, the community needs this store. Where do they go for food? People have to eat. They are

disrespecting our community when they say they want to close this store. South LA needs every single grocery store.”

Rebecka Jackson, co-chair of the Ralphs protest and organizer for the Harriet Tubman Center, said: “In Cuba profits are never a consideration in ensuring essential services are accessible to all. The genocidal U.S. government should take a lesson from the revolutionary people’s government of Cuba. Access to fresh food is a human right and all workers should be provided for equally.”

The issues of profitability versus people’s needs, whether the arguments by the large monopoly grocery chains are true or false, and the right of communities to take over services that are vital to the survival of the community, will undoubtedly keep coming up.

One thing is certain: The centralization and technology involved in the ability to provide fresh and plentiful food at a relatively low cost to communities is desirable and was a step forward in humanity’s ability to feed itself. The only problem is who owns the technology, the fulfillment and distribution centers.

It’s clear here in South Central, anyway, that the community believes that the store, with all its infrastructure, belongs to them — as do the union jobs and hazard pay. It’s the workers there who made those profits for Kroger and it’s the community that paid for that store many times over with their purchases. So why not?

Photos: Scott Scheffer, Anthony Dawahare, UFCW Local 770

