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## A 'LOCAL' WALKOUT CAN'T WORK

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*By Kelly Candaele and Peter Dreier. Los Angeles Times.  
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The 60,000 grocery workers who went on strike almost five months ago have reluctantly ratified a contract that many consider a setback in terms of wages and benefits. The labor movement and its allies hoped that the strike would be settled without significant concessions by the union. Instead, employees will now shoulder increased costs for healthcare benefits, and a "two-tier" wage system will bring new hires in at much-reduced pay levels. Was this result inevitable?

The answer is important because unions and employers throughout the country will be drawing lessons from the strike. Heading into the conflict, the three giant supermarket chains involved - Safeway (which owns Vons), Kroger (which owns Ralphs) and Albertsons - had most of the advantages. They understood that although the United Food and Commercial Workers was a national organization with more than a million members, the main battle would be with the seven independent locals in Southern California.

The public was very sympathetic with the strikers. But in a classic divide-and-conquer strategy, the chains calculated in advance that they could take millions of dollars in losses in their Southern California stores but cushion their losses by operating unimpeded throughout the rest of the nation. The chains convinced most institutional investors that the corporations could beat down their labor costs significantly nationwide by starting in California.

There is a reason why the United Auto Workers negotiates a national contract that covers all locals and the major automobile manufacturers under one agreement. It keeps the employer from playing one small local against another.

Historically, unions have won major strikes through grass-roots solidarity, organizational preparation and the cultivation of community and political support. The UFCW's campaign should have been nationwide from the start. Through boycotts and picketing of stores nationwide and the involvement of the AFL-CIO, the union could have demonstrated early on that it had power beyond Southern California.

When the United Farm Workers was attempting to organize the California grape-picking industry in the 1970s, its boycott of Gallo wine engaged virtually every community in the nation. Millions of shoppers started making the connection between their choices and the conditions of workers in the fields.

The Southern California grocery workers union hadn't resorted to the strike weapon since 1978. But in recent years, the chains have focused more on profits and dividends. Union leaders warned members that the contract negotiations would be tougher than previous years, but a more comprehensive strike strategy was needed.

To win a strike, unions need to mobilize their allies - other unions, consumers, community groups, religious congregations and students, among them. Four years ago, when the Service Employees International Union was preparing for its "justice for janitors" strike in Los Angeles, it began cultivating allies and explaining its views a year in advance. When the strike came, there were thousands of supporters ready to march, transforming the strike into a crusade.

Additionally, a well-thought-out "corporate campaign" by the union would have reinforced the fact that Vons, for example, was not a faceless corporation but was run by real people who had choices about how they treated their workers. The goal in this approach is to embarrass key corporate decision-makers, to isolate them from lenders and stockholders and to put pressure on key board members from their social and business friends.

It took three months before public attention was directed toward Vons Chief Executive Steve Burd, when a group of clergy

marched on his house. The union could have focused on other potential targets - such as Peter Magowan, a Safeway board member and the president of the San Francisco Giants. How would Magowan have reacted to a "Giants Fans for Social Justice" group that threatened to picket Giant games unless he pressured Burd to ease his more extreme demands?

This strike was about health benefits and wages, but it was also about something much larger: the Wal-Marting of America. Wal-Mart symbolizes the low-road corporate strategy of part-time workers, few benefits and no unions. Rather than joining with the union to fight Wal-Mart's undermining of living standards, the chains chose to take on their own employees. It would be tragic if U.S. working people, and their union leaders, learn the wrong lesson here - that corporate might always defeats social justice.

The UFCW rank and file showed a tenacity and devotion to their union that is rare today. That they stayed strong was not a testament to greed, as some cynical commentators have suggested. Strikers were most upset by the two-tier system that will bring new hires in at a lower base pay than themselves.

The UFCW local had the loyalty of its members and the sympathy of the majority of local consumers. But that wasn't enough. The union could not beat huge national corporations without expanding the war to a national battleground. Though corporate America may hope that unions throughout the country accept that "givebacks" are now unavoidable, it remains to be seen whether the labor movement distills a different message. To compete, labor will have to work harder and smarter and realize that unions can't go it alone.

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