

THEIR OPINIONS

local **view**

Grocery union gets it bagged

BY PETER DREIER

DODGERS pitcher Brad Penny, who suffered a big slump in the second half of last season, is having a great year so far. But my nominee for the "comeback of the year" award is the United Food and Commercial Workers, the union that represents 65,000 grocery workers from Bakersfield to the Mexican border.

Earlier this week, the workers voted to approve a new contract with Southern California's three major supermarket chains — Ralphs, Albertson's and Vons. The settlement restores almost all the losses in pay and health benefits that employees suffered three years ago following a 141-day strike and lockout. Once again, working at a unionized grocery chain store will mean solid, secure middle-class jobs that can sustain families and the economic vitality of communities.

For the employees, many of whom lost their savings and even their homes during the strike, a key provision of the new contract is the elimination of the widely loathed two-tier pay system. Workers hired after the strike started at a lower base salary and would have never been able to make as much money as veteran employees despite doing the exact same job.

The new contract also reverses an onerous aspect of the previous pact — the precipitous reduction of health insurance benefits. Until this week, newer employees had to work 12-18 months to qualify for health coverage, while their children had to wait as long as 30 months. Now workers and their children will qualify for company insurance after six months, a huge change that will motivate many to stay in their jobs.

All grocery workers covered by the contract also received wage increases — the first pay hikes in five years — while retirement benefits were protected.



Damian Dovarganes/Associated Press

Workers hold a news conference in early July as they prepare for a possible grocery strike. A settlement later averted the walkout.

The most impressive aspect of the settlement, however, is that it was achieved without the workers going on strike. The UFCW did a much better job this time of reaching out to allies before contract negotiations began.

For example, a coalition of religious, community and academic leaders created a blue ribbon commission that produced and widely disseminated a report on the inequities of the two-tier system and the need for more grocery stores in underserved communities.

Along with labor, religious and community allies, the UFCW organized the Walk for Respect campaign. Volunteers went door to door throughout the city, collecting more than 50,000 signatures from shoppers pledging not to shop at the three chains in the event of a strike or lockout. This effort helped transform the campaign from a labor-management fight into a moral crusade.

The UFCW recruited award-winning filmmaker Robert Greenwald and his company Brave New Films, who created "Supermarketswindle.com," a pro-worker Internet campaign with hard-hitting videos and a provocative Web site that reached tens of thousands of consumers.

The UFCW showed the human side of the labor-management battle by encouraging workers to tell their own stories through the media and public appearances — stories about their working conditions, their pay, their families

and the difficulty of making ends meet in this high-cost area.

At a time of growing national concern about the lack of affordable health insurance, the UFCW's emphasis on restoring health benefits resonated with the public.

The UFCW did a good job of explaining that the three chains are among the largest, and most profitable, corporations in the country, reminding Angelenos about the widening gap between the rich and everyone else.

The chains did not take a hard line this time. They did not want to repeat the economic and public relations disasters during the strike. They not only lost a combined \$2 billion, they also lost considerable good will among shoppers, many of whom switched loyalties to other grocery stores and didn't return to the Big 3 when the strike was over. Now, both the union and the chains will work to bring those shoppers back.

Both the chains and the workers scored a victory, putting a key L.A. industry back on the economic high road. In fact, the UFCW comeback is a victory for all of Southern Californians.

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