

Labor leaders back Raley's employees

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

Heading into eleventh-hour contract negotiations with Raley's, unionized grocery workers got public support Thursday from Sacramento's most powerful labor leaders.

A rally in front of the federal building in downtown Sacramento turned into a rousing send-off for union negotiator Jacques Loveall, president of Local 8 of the United Food and Commercial Workers.

The UFCW already had the backing of unions that Raley's would need to keep its doors open, such as the Teamsters. Now it has the support of a slew of unions outside the grocery industry, with leaders saying their members wouldn't cross picket lines.

"We will not shop at Raley's," said Yvonne Walker of Local 1000 of the Service Employees International Union, which represents thousands of state workers.

Given Sacramento's mostly pro-union sympathies – and the choices available to shoppers in a crowded supermarket field – a strike could leave Raley's isolated. Raley's vows to keep as many stores open as possible in a walkout.

Before leaving for negotiations in San Francisco, Loveall said the UFCW would bargain around the clock to get a fair deal. "It's not too late," he told the crowd of about 200. "There are two days to bargain."

Raley's had threatened to unilaterally impose the terms of its "last and final" contract offer Thursday, which includes wage concessions. That would have likely triggered a strike.

The West Sacramento grocer has put that on hold until midnight

Saturday and agreed to resume bargaining instead.

Talks ended late Thursday and were scheduled to resume today.

If there's no deal by Saturday night, and Raley's imposes the contract terms, a strike could begin the next morning.

Raley's says it needs to reduce labor costs to compete with nonunion stores. The UFCW agreed to concessions with another struggling grocer, Save Mart Supermarkets, in September.

Loveall expressed hope for a deal with Raley's. "We're within striking distance" on most issues, he said in an interview.

But there's a big sticking point: retiree health care. Raley's wants to eliminate coverage for retirees who are eligible for Medicare, as it has done already for nonunion retirees.

Loveall's response: "Not on our watch."

Raley's argues that retiree health care shouldn't be an issue this week. The company is threatening to impose only the wage portion of its "last and final" offer, said John Segale, a spokesman for the West Sacramento grocer.

The union filed an unfair labor charge Thursday with the National Labor Relations Board, accusing Raley's of bargaining in bad faith. If upheld, Loveall said, the filing could make it harder for Raley's to hire replacement workers, as it has threatened.

Segale called the charge "frivolous."