

Raley's workers walk the line; management keeps doors open

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

The grocery shelves were stocked, the coffee stand was open and shoppers were lined up at the deli counter for sandwiches.

On the picket line outside, morale was high and strikers said they were settling in for the long haul. They pumped their fists every time a potential customer left without going inside.

Monday was Day 2 of the strike against Raley's, and across Northern California both sides were scrambling to put the best face on things. It wasn't clear if labor or management had gained the upper hand.

Raley's said it was pleased with overall operations and customer support. What's more, spokesman John Segale said, "nearly half" of union employees showed up for work Monday.

The United Food and Commercial Workers denied that many workers crossed the picket line, but the union wouldn't provide specifics. UFCW officials said the picketing workers succeeded in driving shoppers away.

"Raley's customers are shopping elsewhere while the workers are on strike," said UFCW Local 8 President Jacques Loveall in an emailed statement.

Raley's has two stores in South Lake Tahoe. Pickets were out in force at the driveway entrances to both stores as well as in front of the store. People carrying signs were also along the highway in front of the Raley's owned gas station at the Y.

While the company says normal operations are under way, the usual Monday donation to Bread & Broth was not received.

Company Chief Executive Michael Teel, in a radio commercial airing Monday, urged shoppers to ignore the strike.

"You can still count on us," he said, reminding listeners of the grocer's decades of experience.

Getting a gauge on the volume of customer activity was difficult. Segale said it was clear that some consumers "changed their shopping habits" but others were "coming out, supporting the company."

One Sacramento customer, Dolly Rominger, said she came to the Folsom Boulevard store only because her mobility is limited and she didn't want to drive farther. She expressed sympathy for the picketing workers.

"I feel bad for them," said Rominger, who lives about three miles away. "I don't like to see anybody have to stand on a picket line."

Strikers said they walked out largely to protect their health plans. Raley's wants to switch them to a different plan and eliminate health coverage for retired workers who are eligible for Medicare.

Not all shoppers were convinced that the strike was warranted. Vanessa Herburger, 26, her cart full of fresh fruit and vegetables, expressed mixed sentiments. Herburger, a state worker, said she has endured her share of cuts and furloughs in recent years.

"They are standing up for what they believe, and that's good, Herburger said. "But I'm just happy to have a job."

Maybe the Raley's employees should be, too, she suggested, during tough economic times.

Supermarket industry consultant Bob Reynolds said Raley's could find itself isolated, as there is no shortage of union and nonunion stores where Northern Californians can buy groceries without crossing a picket line.

"It's not just short term, it's long term," he said. "You never want to show your most loyal shoppers where the alternatives are."

The strike has put something of a strain on Raley's operations. Store hours have been reduced at several locations. But every store is open, and Segale said logistics are running smoothly for the most part.

Although Teamsters drivers are refusing to cross the picket lines, Segale said they're delivering products to nearby sites, where store managers can collect them. Besides, many deliveries come from nonunion vendors, he said.

"They're able to get product to the stores ... and put on the shelves," he said.

Yet it's typical in supermarket strikes for some products to run short eventually, Reynolds said.

Even if replacement workers are hired, as Raley's has promised, it's tough to keep all departments fully stocked over the long haul, he said.

The union says it has amassed a \$60 million strike fund and will pay striking employees at least \$200 a week. That's a fraction of the \$840 a week earned on the job by veteran employees at the top of the pay scale.

Still, the striking workers said they were committed to staying out of work for as long as it takes.

"If it lasts until the winter, and the rain is falling down, I'll be out here," said Brian Pickens, who was manning the picket line at the Folsom store. "I'm in for the long haul."

Ken Jacobs, a labor relations expert at the University of California at Berkeley, said most strikers stayed off the job for the duration of the nine-month Southern California grocery walkout in 2003.

He said Raley's proposals on health insurance could keep the workers anchored to the picket line.

"When people see their health care threatened, that's the kind of thing that tends to keep people motivated," he said.

This appears to be the first walkout in the U.S. grocery industry since 2010, when employees struck warehouses owned by Shaw's Supermarkets in New England. That strike lasted four months.

– Lake Tahoe News contributed to this story.