

Bill Caldwell

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Bill Caldwell (b. August 20, 1958) has worked at Charleston-area Kroger store for 44 years. He currently works at store 784 in Teays Valley as a meat cutter and has been a shop steward for United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 400 for 20-30 years. In this interview he speaks about recent contract negotiations with Kroger, union actions he's been involved in in the past, and his experience as a grocery store "essential worker" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This interview is part of a collection of interviews with UFCW member Kroger workers conducted remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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BC: Bill Caldwell
EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: Okay. So yeah, this is for the West Virginia Folklife Program, and I'm doing interviews with several Kroger workers who were involved in the union contract--talking about that and also what it's like being an essential worker during the pandemic.

BC: Okay.

EH: So to start, why don't you introduce yourself, tell me who you are, where you're from and when you were born?

BC: Okay. It's Bill Caldwell. I've worked for Kroger's for 44 years. I've worked in the Charleston area the whole time.

EH: Mmhm.

BC: Been in almost every department in the whole store, so after 44 years I've seen it all. And I was born in 1958, August the 20th.

EH: Alright.

BC: That was a long time ago!

EH: (laughs)

BC: (laughs)

EH: What is your store?

BC: Okay and the store is, well store number 784 but it's Teays Valley, West Virginia.

EH: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your family background.

BC: Okay, I have a wonderful wife, 2 children, 3 grandchildren. Been in the National Guard and then pretty much the rest of my life was working for Krogers and going outdoors--I love the outdoors. Like to hunt, fish, hike, explore, whatever it is.

EH: Nice.

BC: As long as I'm outside, I'm happy.

EH: Very nice. What about your parents--what did they do?

BC: Okay, and both my parents, they're 85 years old. They're both doing well for 85! My mom worked for a mental health facility and my dad worked for the Board of Education.

EH: Okay. And what's your role in the union?

BC: This year I'm a--I mean I've been a shop steward for over 20, probably 30 years. And then this last time all we did was just go out and try to roll up support from other stores and get other employees, since I've been around and I've almost worked at every store within this area. So just helping get people out and get 'em motivated because the more people you have, the stronger you are, and the company realizes that you're serious.

EH: Right. And what's your current job?

BC: I'm a meat cutter.

EH: Sorry my cat likes to walk by the mic--I'm gonna put her outside this room. Hold on one second.

03:07

BC: Okay.

EH: Starts bugging me whenever she hears my voice and I'm not paying attention to her.

BC: Okay (laughs)

EH: (laughs) So why don't you tell me a little bit about the recent union negotiations.

BC: Okay, we had a real short contract. It was only 2 and a half years and we never could figure out why, but it went out at the end of August. Of course then you have this COVID going on and that even slows up the process because it is a slow process. And we had 2 extensions. It went into, well let's see--into November--and it was up August the 29th. And I guess it's really difficult, doing it on the phone as you can tell, is not easy. So I can't imagine them trying to talk and work, 'cause I was on the negotiating committee on the last contract. And I got to see how it works, so I know this was difficult on both sides. So it just seemed like it took forever. But then you know, nobody ever really gets serious 'til you know, the last month and then it gets down to it. And they just weren't willing to give up anything other than, you know, they always say, "This is your slice of pie and this is all you're gonna get."

EH: Uh-huh.

BC: Yes. No matter what. No matter how bad it is, no matter what you're going through, no matter if you're making tons of money or not, this is your slice of pie and you're not getting any more. So of course then it starts getting a little ugly and you know, they never ever said "last and final offer," in the whole 40 years I think that I've been with 'em. And they didn't this time, but you know, they kept saying, "Well this is all." So we took a vote on the contract and a vote to strike. And it won overwhelmingly. So that got 'em working a little bit harder. Even got the president of this area, Mid-Atlantic area to come in and talk to some people in the stores, which I was really surprised at. So it worked. I mean we got the contract, you know. We only got that piece of pie--I promise you! We didn't get any more! (laughs)

EH: Yeah, right! And so how long is that contract good for?

BC: This one is for 3 and a half years. I believe it runs out in February. End of February.

EH: What was the chief concern for you with the negotiations?

06:26

BC: Well, for me it was the healthcare, 'cause I'm trying to retire and they were gonna butcher it and it was gonna cost--if I retire early, I have to pay for my health insurance until I become 65 and get on Medicare, so I was really concerned about that because it wasn't looking good. I mean prescriptions were gonna go sky high, deductibles were gonna go up, co-pays, and I was going, I mean I've been trying to retire and trying to retire and I finally get close and now they throw another stump in the way. So that was my biggest concern. But you know, there was a lot of--they wasn't given any of the, I call the old people, the people that's been there a long time--they wasn't even gonna give them a raise.

EH: Wow.

BC: And I was gonna get one just because I'm the assistant head person. When the other one goes on vacation then I am because I'm too old for all that other responsibility (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

BC: So I did get a, I call it a decent raise from Krogers anyway. But it was the healthcare that was the main issue with me and probably 80, 85% of the other employees.

EH: And then tell me, did you participate in a car caravan protest or a socially distant protest or anything like that?

BC: Yes. Yeah, yeah. I did one of the car protests and it was kinda neat, but I don't--this is my opinion--it was like you say, you have to step outside the boundaries here because everybody was scared to death to get close and you didn't want to--you know, you want to show people that you care and you want to--but you don't want to get anybody sick. You know, you're just trying to express your opinion and your voice. So yeah, honking the horn and driving by and holding signs out the window. You know, it got a little bit, but you know if you're not standing there and people have to walk by ya and look at ya, it just didn't do this--I don't feel it did the affect. Because we just drive on by and they go, "Well, that was weird!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Right!

BC: So they did that a couple, probably 3 or 4 times and then as it got closer, then we started, well we worked at 1 store. I think we did it, went up and protested on I think 4 occasions at that one because it was just a good area--busy street, big store, lots of people. And then as it got closer to it, then we hopped from store to store.

EH: I see.

BC: And stood out there with signs and had our masks on and it was, of course it was a political year too, so you have a lot of political people there that were supporting us. So it was kind of exciting and, but never enough people show up if you ask met.

EH: Right, mm-hm. What in your view was Kroger's attitude at the bargaining table?

10:08

BC: (laughs) Poor! Extremely poor. I'll be nice! Yeah, I mean, yeah, I mean even--like I said, I was on the one 2 years ago. It started out pretty slow and you know, they're not gonna offer you anything at the beginning. But this time, I mean, from the end of August all the way to November and they couldn't even come close, that we almost had to strike! And then finally when we decided that okay, when push comes to shove, at least they started trying and had the president come down and talk to people saying, "What's wrong, what's wrong?" So I mean, you know, it doesn't take a rocket scientist! I don't know anybody (laughs) that ever grows up and says, "I wanna go work in a grocery store the rest of my life." (laughs) You know, that's me! You know--I can't believe it's been 44 years already. But yes, but I did and it was the choices I made and yes, I've made a living and I have a home. I've got retirement. But to get treated and I guess, don't care is the attitude I get, and everybody else that it's pretty sad.

EH: Yeah, that's awful. What are your main concerns generally as a Kroger worker/employee?

BC: (laughs) Major concern is I don't see how the people that has 20 more years to go are gonna make it! Because you know, when I started it was, you had to know somebody to get on the job, truly. And it was, I will call it a good job. We have Carbide and DuPont chemical plants that used to be big and we were making as much money as they were.

EH: Wow.

BC: Yeah. And of course now, you know, 30 years later, they're making way more than we are and we're you know...Like I said, I make a living. I don't expect to get rich, but I do expect to be treated fair. And when I think, yes, if you're CEO, you should make a whole lot of money, I agree. But they paid the CEO just 5 months ago? 21 million dollars!

EH: Oh my.

BC: And a bonus!

EH: Wow.

13:19

BC: You know how much we could get an hour? I mean you could have probably almost paid every employee \$2 on the hour if you'd had just left it. So you know, I just think they need to pay their employees more because there's nobody here that's gonna be making a living anymore. It's always gonna be part-time job.

EH: Yeah, right.

BC: And before, people were making a living! I mean you know, we worked 40 hours a week, 40-48 hours a week, 6 days a week. I probably did that for 20 years--maybe more! Because you made double time on Sundays, time and a half, and you could! You could buy ya a home, you could buy ya a nice vehicle and now people are just living paycheck to paycheck, scrapping for every hour they can get. Except these young ones, they don't care! (laughs)

EH: Maybe they'll care eventually.

BC: Yeah, when mom and dad aren't paying the way?

EH: Right, right.

BC: 'Cause you know I've got--and another thing is you know, people don't have to be on any insurance 'til they're 27. When I was 17, 18, I was already moved out, working and providing for myself. And making all kinds of dumb mistakes!

EH: (laughs) Right.

BC: (laughs) But yes. So that's the worst part.

EH: Yeah. Have you been involved in actions in the past through the union?

15:09

BC: When you mean actions, you mean like the demonstrations and...

EH: Yeah, mmhm.

BC: Yes, probably not as--usually just when contracts run out. And I say that but then I backtrack. Probably 5 or 6 years ago down in Virginia, it's Right to Work law too. And they have a real hard time down there keeping employees in the union. And we went down there and tried to get more people to join the union, do get involved, so that they would have a larger voice when it come contract time. So I did get to do that and that was probably the best, I think I did it for about 3 months--the best 3 months of my 44 years with Krogers, probably. Got to work with a bunch of great people and got to do something different.

EH: Right. How have you seen the union change?

BC: Oooh (laughs). Yes, we have gotten pretty weak. Pretty weak, you know. But without 'em, I'm telling you, we would be nothing without 'em. We need them very badly. And it's for the greedy companies that want to keep everything for their self. And, yes. We can't go without 'em. They really, and Local 400 has really stood up and tried to make a difference with Krogers. And they do well but they've lost, I don't know, all their power. You know, before there wasn't laws that, and now there's laws like OSHA and all that, and now you don't need--I shouldn't say don't need. OSHA takes over so you don't need the union to come in and push. And then it takes forever for OSHA to do anything anymore because there's too long a line. Too much middle men that get in the way and I guess it just never gets fixed. So but I can remember when a union representative would walk in the store and the managers would stop what they're doing, get pencil and paper, and meet 'em at the door and walk around with 'em and write down things that were wrong. And they would fix them immediately. And now, they don't even recognize 'em when they come in. So yes, there's been a big difference from 1976 to 2020 (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Yeah.

BC: Oh, that just makes me sound old! My goodness!

EH: (laughs) Tell me about your experience as an essential worker during the pandemic--the good, the bad and the ugly.

BC: The good, the bad, and the ugly! Okay, I'm trying to think of the good, okay? I'm trying to think...

EH: Yeah, there might not be!

19:00

BC: Right. The only good probably is, you could work all you wanted, pretty much. So anybody that wanted to could make extra money because Krogers was always tight with overtime. And then plus, with people being sick, there was always needing help in another departments and stuff. So that's probably the good. The bad is going in there every day and getting wiped out, I mean just totally gutted there at the beginning when there wasn't any toilet paper or paper towels and I mean, it was just unbelievable. And we get orders every day. When I say orders, I'm talking probably roughly 2, well, I'm gonna--that's not right. Probably between milk, produce, dairy, meat, grocery, I'm gonna--that's probably 4 tractor trailers every day? And it would be gutted. Gutted. And people coming in and grabbing--I will say most of 'em--you're gonna have a couple nasty, but through the whole thing, they were pretty grateful that we were staying open and doing the work. And yeah, we were essential workers (laughs). Well we were just trying to do our job to get paid and keep going. I mean, yeah, we might, you need a grocery store, I agree, but I don't think I would put myself anywhere close to the nurses and the doctors and the physicians and... but I guess we got to be important for a little while.

EH: While people remembered! (laughs)

BC: (laughs) And then I guess the ugly part would be now because for--when did this start? I don't even remember when it started now.

EH: March.

BC: Yeah, I was gonna say March, and they were talking about it coming in January. But you know, it wasn't around here in West Virginia, it didn't get bad at the beginning. I mean I was beginning, you know, you sit here and look around and going, you know, New York and all them were just going crazy. And we weren't having anything! And now we have I think, I don't want to be quoted on this one, but I think 8 people out right now.

EH: Wow, that's awful.

BC: In the stores. Yeah, employees. And 4 of 'em in the last week and a half!

EH: Wow.

BC: So it keeps, that part's getting a little ugly now. And you still can't quite figure out where it's coming from.

EH: Yeah, right.

BC: Because you know, every day and we probably have 800-1,000 customers roughly every single day--and you would think... But I think most everybody's getting it from family.

EH: Yeah.

BC: Just my opinion because I mean, you would think the grocery store would be one of the worst places to go other than eating out I guess.

EH: Yeah.

BC: 'Cause that's a lot of people!

EH: Yeah, I mean I do think that the masks helped.

BC: Do I?

EH: I mean I said I did.

BC: No, I don't think so either, because well, for one thing, like I'm working in the meat department and it's cold and I work with power equipment and if you have that mask on back there, your glasses--I've got glasses--you can't see! So we don't wear it back there. 'Course now there's nobody, there's probably at the most 2 people in a 20X20 room. So, and it's cold.

EH: Right.

BC: And then we'll put 'em on when we go outside. I mean out on the front and stock with customers and stuff, but. And then half the customers, well I won't say half now, don't wear the masks. So and Krogers isn't gonna argue that even if it is mandatory.

EH: Mmhm. Yeah, that's difficult.

BC: So that's, yes. That part's and this is my difficult part. Like I say, I'm getting ready to retire, right? I've been putting--I get a retirement from Krogers, Krogers pays so much for every hour I work. But if I would get sick and die, heaven forbid (laughs) because I get nothing!

EH: Wow.

BC: Yeah, I get nothing other than a life insurance. I mean a life insurance policy. Because I can't get anything 'til I retire.

EH: Wow.

BC: So that would be, and you know, there's a lot of mess out there in this Kroger. I hate to think that, cause that's all we've been working for for the last--after 20-- you get 20 years in, that's what you start looking for 'cause you've got all your vacation, you've done what you need. You are just working your time in. And that's the part that makes me the nervous.

EH: Yeah.

BC: If I would get sick.

EH: Yeah, what are--so how far are you from retirement at this point?

25:40

BC: Well, 65 is--I'm 62. 65 is I get max retirement. And I'm not gonna make it another 3 years. I'm sorry! (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

BC: So I've gotta give up roughly 3% for every year I go before 65. And I'm starting to get my paperwork together now. So I hate saying 'cause I've made a couple dates and then didn't make it (laughs) but I'm hoping in the very near future.

EH: Yeah. My mom was a public school teacher and she didn't quite make it either. She just had to get out.

BC: Yes! You know, when you do something for that long unless you LOVE your job, that's too long for anybody.

EH: I mean she loved it but also it was getting just more and more difficult.

BC: Oh I can't imagine now. Like I said, my dad worked for the Board of Education. He was a biology teacher at the beginning and the stories he tells now--he would just be stomping at the bit! (laughs)

EH: Yeah!

BC: The things he'd have to put up with now.

EH: Right, yeah definitely. So what are your thoughts and concerns going into this winter with COVID and everything?

27:23

BC: Well, I guess I was thinking it was gonna be, it should be over, but now it seems to be getting worse!

EH: Yeah, I know.

BC: But you know, we've never ever closed down and economy or the United States for anything. No diseases. None! And I just, and like I said, I have 2 parents that are 85 years old. So that does involve them and me. But to shut down and ruin people's lives that are trying to get started or are right smack dab in the middle of their life and you take everything they've worked for away from 'em, I don't think that's right.

EH: Yeah.

BC: You know, yes we need to take care of the very young and we need to take care of the very old and do everything possible. But to shut down and hurt these people, I just feel is not right.

EH: Right, unless they're getting money to stay home, I mean there's no way you can expect people to do that.

BC: No, no. No. It's gonna take a long time to get out of this mess.

EH: Mmhm. Yeah.

BC: I hope I can just, I hope it just gets better. I was hoping it would get better right after the election, but that's a whole 'nother story too! (laughs)

EH: Yeah, we'll see. I mean I guess they just gave the first people in the UK the vaccine but you know, we'll see how long it takes to get here and how safe it is and all of that.

BC: Yes, it still hasn't, we still haven't approved it yet, have we?

EH: I don't believe so.

BC: I don't think so either. I still think it's gonna be a couple more days. And I'm thinking, "My gosh! How long does it takes?" It didn't take the UK very long.

EH: I know.

29:48

BC: And it's our drug. We made it over here. And they got it first!

EH: Well hopefully soon.

BC: Yeah, can I ask you just--are you gonna take the vaccine.

EH: Oh yeah, I will. I do, I mean usually a vaccine should be tested for 2 years, so the short timeline worries me some, but I will take it. But yeah, I am a little concerned about the timeline.

BC: Yeah. Did you take a flu shot?

EH: Yeah, yep.

BC: Good girl!

EH: (laughs) Yeah, I have to do that, especially this year. But yeah, what about you--will you take the vaccine?

BC: I think, but I'm not gonna be first!

EH: (laughs) I know! I mean that's why--it's kind of good that the UK is testing it for us.

BC: I mean I did brave up and take the shingles shot.

EH: Mmhm, yeah.

BC: And I didn't think I would take that, but they told me--I've seen what it can do. And I said "Oh my goodness." So I took it. It hurt!

EH: Yeah (laughs)

BC: It made my arm sore! I couldn't believe it.

EH: Right, yep! Some of them do that.

BC: Yes, and the vaccines will work and we need to do it, but man, makes me nervous when they do something fast.

EH: I know, I know. That's the concern for me too. But yeah, well let me see--what would be your hope for the future of the union?

31:40

BC: I would like to see it get stronger. Now how, I don't know. I've been trying to figure out how to get stronger because I mean like other unions--the teamsters, and of course the coal's getting weak because there's not much coal anymore.

EH: Right.

BC: But you know if you don't have, if you can't make a living from a company, I just don't see the union getting stronger in like a grocery store. Yes, like the Teamsters and UPS, you know, they're still making lots of money, especially now delivering packages like nobody's business. Yes, they're strong but they've got, they just have to, ours has to figure out how to become strong with part-time workers. I hope they become strong because Krogers is tough. Krogers is tough. They are pretty greedy for--I think they're in the top 5 food chains, so--and they make a lot of money. I don't care what they say.

EH: Oh yeah. 21 million is a lot of money.

BC: Yes, yeah and that's just one person! (laughs)

EH: Yeah, that's crazy.

BC: And with all this, people are buying more groceries than they have in a long time. And people don't eat out so, and markup on all this product is more than it's ever been because they can process it so much faster and sell it at greater volumes. I mean, you know, we've got stuff in the meat shop that's 60% markup!

EH: Wow! That's crazy.

BC: I know. A lot of it.

EH: Yeah, I was wondering if--it seemed like I was spending more on groceries and I was wondering what was going on! (laughs)

BC: (laughs) Yes! I mean people aren't eating out and they have the Clicklist, you know nobody's coming. But they haven't got that figured out yet. This is still a work in progress. But, cause they are, I mean they're busy. They don't charge anything and my wife uses it because I don't want to grocery shop after being there 6 days a week or 5 days a week. So we, she uses it all the time. Doesn't cost anything! So, but they're having a hard time coping with it. So...

EH: Yeah, I mean it's hard to, it's also like Kroger is one of the few union grocery stores, so as a consumer, it seems to me like it's better than shopping at other places that are non-union, but yeah, it is troubling how workers have been treated through this.

BC: Yes! And if you take surveys and I've seen 'em where companies make more money and larger profits with union workers than they do with non-union workers. They make more money. So you know, why they don't want to use us to our most capable, I don't know why other than they just don't like seeing us get all that money! I mean, yeah, or whatever--it isn't all that money.

EH: Yeah, right.

BC: I think I can remember--I'm trying to think how many years ago that was, but they offered profit sharing in one of our contracts and yeah, of course we did it and we did quite well! So well they did away with it.

EH: Yeah, yeah right.

BC: See, I know! We were getting money, so if we get money, that means they were making a whole lot more money!

EH: Yeah, right. Yeah, that's tough.

BC: So I thought that was kinda odd.

EH: And they...go ahead.

BC: No, I'm sorry. The old employees that have been here, I mean we know how to make them money. I mean we can, I mean we just do. That's what we've been doing all of our whole life! We oughta be half decent at it. But they don't want to listen to us. They really don't.

37:14

EH: And did they give you some hazard pay at the beginning but they don't have it anymore?

BC: I forgot to mention that! I'm glad you brought that up! Yeah, they got pressured into it at the beginning and they did. I think it was \$200 or \$300 dollars.

EH: Just a flat rate?

BC: That's when Target and...yeah, it was just a flat check, yeah. But that was just because Target and Walmart and everybody else was and then after so long, I remember Target came out and was gonna give so many million dollars to all their workers, which I mean, I know it would have been just a couple hundred dollars, whatever. And Krogers gave us, they gave us nothing. And then finally with the union giving 'em a hard time, and with Facebook and whoever else were shunning 'em, we got...and here we go, you know, I'm glad that they gave us something because for years they gave us nothing. I mean nothing. And they gave us 100 or 1,000 fuel points, and \$100 Kroger, on our card. And I thought, okay, I'm glad you give us something, but you know they get 50% markup on this stuff, we have to spend that money there at Krogers, so they get all that back.

EH: Like a company store.

38:52

BC: Yes! So we really didn't get hardly any money. But we got more than we would. You know? But to come into work every day and if it's as bad as they say it is, they oughta be a little bit more appreciative with what we're doing.

EH: Yeah, definitely.

BC: And you know the managers are--I'm sorry--the managers are, it's the upper echelon that aren't down here getting the boots wet and dirty and seeing what's going on every day. 'Cause these managers have to put up with a bunch of stuff too.

EH: Yeah, it's the execs that aren't local.

BC: Yeah, the executives. And there's a lot of them. Oh my gosh.

EH: Well is there anything else you would like to share? Those are all my questions.

BC: Is that all your questions?

EH: Yeah.

BC: No, but I'm glad you asked that last one because I wanted to bring that up. I just thought that was a little pathetic on...

EH: Well it's interesting that people really want to celebrate these heroes and essential workers, but they aren't actually doing things that help them.

BC: No! They are just trying to make money, that's all. They're trying to make money. That's the bottom line. I call it the greedy. They're just getting greedy. They just don't know how to treat people anymore. So, but no. I hope I did okay!

EH: Yeah! This was great. Thank you so much for sharing all this with me and taking the time. I feel like we're ending on a non-hopeful, unhelpful note.

BC: I know, because I keep thinking it's gonna be over, but I've been thinking this for 4 or 5 months now!

EH: Yeah, right.

BC: And like I say, it was never--I go by the schools that are open and then closing. And we weren't bad at all. And now it's nobody's going to school, people are sick in the stores. It's like it was back in March.

EH: Yeah I know. Even worse.

BC: Yeah, even worse. Yeah, I didn't want to say that though. (laughs)

EH: Well let's hope it gets better soon and the vaccine is safe and everything--and that you can retire soon! (laughs)

BC: Yes! Oh yes, that sounds like a good plan. That's a more positive note!

EH: That's a hopeful note.

BC: So thank you!

EH: Yeah, for sure. So I will email you a release form that will allow us to put this interview in our archive and you can send it back to me snail mail or electronically.

BC: Okay, it will probably--will you send it to me or will you send it to Gary?

EH: I'll sent it to you--your email that I emailed the Zoom info to. Does that work?

BC: Okay. 'Cause I think he'll have to probably release it. (laughs) He'll probably want to hear what I have to say.

EH: Oh yeah, well he's welcome to, but as far as I'm concerned, it's just--you sign your own. So I'll send it to you but we can definitely share the interviews. I'll share this interview with you too, and the transcript once I have it done.

BC: Okay! Alright.

EH: Alright, well thanks so much, Bill and stay safe and take care.

BC: Okay! You too.

EH: Alright, bye.

BC: Alright, bye-bye.

43:07

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END OF INTERVIEW