

Thomas Fred Hogan

Where: Conducted over Zoom

Date: December 4, 2020

Location: Charleston, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 22:42

Thomas Fred Hogan (b. September 3, 1957, Danville, KY) has been a Kroger worker for over 45 years and is a shop steward for his local chapter of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union. He currently works as a clerk at Kroger store 778, on Delaware Ave. on the West Side of Charleston.

In this interview he speaks about the recent contract negotiations with Kroger, 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.

EH: Emily Hilliard

TH: Thomas Fred Hogan

HoganThomasFred.AudioInt.12.4.20

00:00

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

TH: Okay, my name's Thomas Hogan. I'm in Charleston, West Virginia, and I was born on September the 3rd, 1957.

EH: And tell me a little bit about your family background.

TH: I was born in Eastern Kentucky, in Danville, Kentucky. I was raised in Morehead Kentucky--it's a small town in Eastern Kentucky.

EH: Oh nice!

TH: My father was a supervisor for a bread company Purity Maid Bread Company--worked there until he was medically retired in '72 and my mother, when I was young, worked in a clothing manufacturing factory for a number of years. She was the [union] shop steward there. I don't recall the name of the place, it was just "the factory," and she sewed pockets on jeans. That was her job and she was the shop steward there. And then she worked part-time as a clerk at a jewelry store until we moved to Charleston, West Virginia. And we lived there ever since and I'm still in the house where I was raised.

EH: Oh nice. What brought your family to Charleston?

TH: My father was transferred with the company that he worked for delivering bread, as a supervisor, shipping supervisor.

EH: Ah, okay. How long have you worked at Kroger?

TH: Well I'm gonna retire next September, and I'll have 46 years and 3 months in.

EH: Wow. And which store are you at?

TH: I'm at store 778, the Delaware Ave. store here in Charleston.

EH: Oh okay, that's where I shop. And what is your role there?

TH: I'm a clerk now, but I've done just about everything in the store consistently except for working in the office and the deli.

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

TH: I'm a shop steward. I'm a senior shop steward at 778.

EH: Okay. It sounds like your mom was also the shop steward at her company?

TH: Yes, mmhm, she was.

EH: So you grew up in a union family. Was there a sort of an awareness of the union in your family?

TH: Well, as far as my mom was concerned and my uncle also had an influence on me, and he was a teamster, and he drove liquid oxygen trucks out of Sharon, Pennsylvania. That's close to, I believe, Youngstown, Ohio, and he retired from there as well. So I got a lot of influence from him.

EH: Nice. Why don't you tell me a little bit about what the recent union negotiations were about?

TH: Well the chief issue for our local according to the surveys that were taken, were that medical benefits and the caps on them were going to be like huge. Like they were gonna be like double or triple the weekly employee contribution, or the huge possibility of it because they were underfunding the medical benefits. And a lot of people in our union, or a huge percentage are, you know, they raise families. And they're just working folks. So their medical benefits are the main reason that they work for Kroger! And I know that's a huge benefit to have and we may not be top of the line, but what we do have far outreaches some of the stuff that other people have to live with, and the weekly contributions are usually huge.

EH: When did this...

TH: I know that one...

EH: Go ahead. Sorry, go ahead.

TH: Go ahead.

04:21

TH: The local in Virginia as a matter of fact, UFCW Local in Virginia, because they're a Right to Work state, they pay 200-250 dollars a month for their benefits. And I believe that the company's effort was to try to ring us to a place where we were making contributions that was comparable to the locals in Virginia. And I'm glad that we were able to prevail at the negotiating table and that didn't happen, at least for this contract.

EH: Did that all come down in the midst of the pandemic?

TH: Yeah, and that just added to the importance of the medical benefits! I can't imagine, you know, if you didn't have any medical benefits at all and one of your family members you know, came down with COVID-19, that would just completely devastate, financially, your family if they didn't have medical benefits. One event and it would be over. It wouldn't be a matter of two--one would be enough. Yeah.

EH: Especially since you're interacting with the public every day in your job--that's really important.

TH: Well it's continuous, yeah! The stress is continuous, the awareness that every time that you come in close proximity to a customer which is numerous times a day continually--it doesn't let up, particularly being on the service end if you're on the front line running the cash register. Or like I work the service area and the seafood and the meat right now--that's my assignment. And it's all day long! Every day. And at a number of stores, even with the quotas that they try to keep down, you know the cap on numbers of people in the store by monitoring who comes in and who leaves, still yet, that is consistently a huge number of people to have to be exposed to. And that threat is--it's out there and it's real. And I believe we should be compensated for it, but the Kroger Company, at least here with this local is going to do

whatever will assist them in making their public image better and if they don't have to put forth any money to make their public image better, then they're not gonna do it. It's simple as that. At the bottom line, if we didn't have the ability to negotiate with collective bargaining, we would have a fraction of what we do now.

EH: Yeah, tell me a little bit more about your experience as an essential worker during the pandemic. How did Kroger provide or not provide you with safeguards? Are they enforcing the mask mandate?

07:25

TH: Well they did, you know, to their credit, to their credit, they followed the guidelines that were set forth and they had a pretty quick program at getting barriers in place, you know, for the check stands, for the service areas, and the nature of working the service cases in the meat department, it separates you anyway, you know. But they did, I would say that they did their part as far as eliminating as best they could or mitigating the threat of contact by putting the barriers in and enhancing their cleaning regimen and investing in that, which I'm thankful for. And they did really good at monitoring at the very beginning, spraying and wiping down frequently touched areas and stuff like that--they had a program in place to have the porters go around and tend to cleaning the surfaces and things like that. So yeah, they responded, they responded well to it. And I'm just--I was just concerned because they're not interested in giving us any more per hour pay than what we're getting right now. And I think it's really sad that the medical community doesn't even, you know they're at will employees and the nature of their business is even worse you know, than ours. And they know that their people that they take care of and they wait on and their clients are sick, you know. And I can't imagine what they're--my daughter's a nurse, my wife's a nurse, but she's in research now and doesn't have patient contact. But my daughter's an ER nurse and it's just tremendous for the medical community. I can't imagine.

EH: Right. Yeah, so Kroger didn't offer any kind of hazard pay?

09:23

TH: They did, temporarily, you know. I believe, now this is my opinion--I think it was early in May they offered some, and they paid it for a couple of months and then they added a couple of \$200 bonuses [unintelligible] then after August they didn't, they decided that that had been enough and they were not going to participate in giving the employees any additional money like that. So... they ended that program.

EH: I see. So yeah, tell me what it was like to do this collective bargaining. Did you participate in the car caravan or a socially distant protest or anything?

TH: Yes, I did, and I believe that that was effective. I believe that we got a good response from the public and I deal with a lot of younger employees who don't understand how, what collective bargaining is, or the importance of public opinion and public backing. I believe that the caravans and the exposure to the press and the press coverage that we got was beneficial in putting pressure on the company and making them understand that, you know, nobody wants a strike, nobody wants to strike, but we were really fortunate that we were able to show by way of the caravans and by the news coverage that we were willing to do what we had to do to get a fair contract. And it wasn't a huge ask, I mean we just wanted our health care to be funded. And the raises you know, were not tremendous, but they were raises. So, there's no such thing as a perfect contract but it was a good contract, it's something we could live with.

EH: And did those happen at each store?

TH: Actually we had a couple of different...I wasn't able to participate, because of some personal things that went on, at every one of 'em but I was in 2 of 'em and then one time I was at the Kanawha City store, no, twice! At the Kanawha City store when we did the picket lines--the informational pickets out front. And I believe that that had a good impact and effect.

EH: And what was Kroger's attitude at the bargaining table?

12:13

TH: The only thing that, well I have my own ideas and philosophies about the Kroger Company, that's been informed over the years. They're not gonna do anything that they don't think they have to do. And they will say that they're gonna do one thing and then they will do something else. Okay? So that really diminishes the level of trust from a personal aspect, you know? If a person's completely up front and what terms comes to my mind is one of the letters that they wrote and send out, which you know, "We're putting our best foot forward," referring to the negotiation process. Well my response to that when I read it, in my mind was, "Well if you put your best foot forward we still wouldn't be negotiating." You know what I'm saying? (laughs)

EH: Mmhm. Right!

TH: If your best offer were there then we wouldn't even be talking about this now and this letter wouldn't exist. So obviously you're not being completely forthcoming. You know? (laughs)

EH: Right.

TH: So that pumps me up a little bit, when they put out that--what I feel is misinformation. They're just not being straightforward and upfront.

EH: Right. And did you do your voting at a store level?

TH: Yes, we did, we did it at each store in our local. And I had--on the first vote that we had was about a pension question and funding for pension which was separate and apart from the actual negotiation of the contract. And we did it the same way both times. I participated in counting the votes for the pension fund voting. And we did that at the local and we covered it with a Zoom as well. And had to sequester the boxes, collect the boxes, sequester the boxes and as we opened each box we had to show that all of them were closed and everything was secure and it wasn't being tampered with in any way.

EH: And then you did your bargaining over Zoom as well?

TH: Say that again?

EH: You did the bargaining over Zoom as well?

TH: I don't know the process about the bargaining at all. I mean I was not part of the negotiating committee. I was just in on counting the pension fund votes.

EH: I see. Have you been involved in other union actions in the past?

TH: Yeah, I've been to the eastern part of the state when the nursing home nurses were trying to get a contract with I believe the nursing home in--it wasn't Lewisburg--now doggone it, I can't remember the name of the place we went, but that was last summer. We went and did an action over there with the

nurses over a day. And that, I don't know if that's still ongoing or whether they decided not to give 'em a contract or what. And we were supportive of the teachers when they were doing their--had their problems with getting their raises, things like that--at the Capitol--as all the trade unions were as well.

16:01

EH: Uh-huh. Nice. Yeah, what are your thoughts and concerns going into this winter as an essential worker?

TH: Well, our concerns individually and personally is that we've got to do the things--and I have a great deal of faith in the government guidelines that are in place now, as far as the washing of the hands, and the wearing of the mask, which is you know, nobody likes the mask, you know, and yeah it was something to get used to, but it's necessary. And the distancing is necessary because of the mechanics of how the disease is communicated and transferred. That makes the job challenging in and of itself. But over time you can get used to, you can be conditioned to do and get used to about anything. But my concern is that the efficiency and the effectiveness of the vaccine. That's in question right now, or the number of vaccines. I really have my doubts as to whether or not the clinical trials that were conducted are sufficient enough to give us any, the right amount of certainty as whether or not it's safe, not only is effective but over time, in clinical trial situations is where you prove or disprove a drug is effective AND safe. And I have my doubts about the safety factor in the vaccine at such a short period of time. If I had any concern, that would be it right there, is the thing about the vaccine. The thing of the pandemic is something that as a whole, globally, worldwide, that we weren't prepared for. Even though they told us that they had those teams in place and the World Health Organization had those scientists and doctors in place trying to study these viruses and get ahead of the curve so to speak. We obviously did not accomplish that in a way that we had hoped as a planet, so to speak. And because no one has experience at this level as far as it being completely coast-to-coast on our continent, I don't believe that we were prepared for it, and I really don't think that there was any way to assure that anybody or any organization could have been prepared for it because it was unique and there was some decisions made at higher levels that affects us that I'm not in agreement with, but what it is is what it is, and we've got to live with it. Same way with work. We can be personally very circumspect about our practices when we go to work every day, and I do what I do not only for myself but also for the workers--the people that I work with, and the customers and my family. And that's my chief concern and that's the reason I try to deal with this bad situation and make it as best as I can.

EH: Right. Yeah, I mean I think a lot of vaccines, they say they need about 2 years to test them sufficiently. So I mean I understand that.

TH: Yes, they do. And that's time. It takes time. You can't just you know, like they say, warp speed it. You gotta use different demographics of people, you gotta use different age groups, different sets of people and see how it effects the entire span of your test group. And you can't, you just can't rush that process, it takes time. That's the reason things don't just get done day after tomorrow.

EH: Yeah. Well, is there anything else you'd like to share?

TH: Well, just that everybody stay well. It's gonna, they say that we will have a handle on it by mid-year next year as far as the effectiveness of the vaccines. I just hope and I pray that the safety issue is not something that we have opened the box, that we can't close, you know? And hope everyone does well and it's key to have some agreement as a workforce and as citizens of a country or the world, of human kind! (laughs) Because everybody's in the same box, so to speak! That you just try to buckle down, practice good discipline, be patient, be kind to one another, and it'll be over. Sooner or later, it'll be over. So...

EH: Yeah, that's right. Well thank you so much. This was really great. And I--so this will go into the archive. I have a release form to send you so we can use the interview in our archive which goes to WVU Libraries. Do you have an email address I could mail that to or should I snail mail it?

TH: Actually, I do have and it's [redacted]

EH: Okay. And then if I send it you could either sign it electronically or you could scan it and I can give you my address to mail it back.

TH: Okay.

EH: And yeah, I will also look out for you next time I'm at the store and say hi.

TH: Okay! Good, nice talking to you.

EH: Yeah, you too, well take care.

TH: Okay, you do that as well. See you soon.

EH: Thanks, bye.

TH: Bye.

22:42

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW