

Cheyne Stephens

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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Cheyne Stephens (b. June 13, 1985, Grayson, KY) has been a Kroger worker for 13 years and currently works as the back-up head meat cutter at the 7th Street store in Parkersburg. He also serves as a United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400 shop steward and was involved in the recent contract negotiations with Kroger. In this interview he speaks about the contract negotiations, his experience as a grocery store “essential worker” during the COVID-19 pandemic, and his hope for the future of UFCW.

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

CS: Cheyne Stephens

EH: Emily Hilliard

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EH: Alright. To start, could you introduce yourself and tell me who you are, where you're from and when you were born?

CS: My name is Cheyne Stephens. I was actually born June 13, 1985 and originally I'm from Grayson, Kentucky. But as of right now, I've lived the last 13 years in Williamstown, West Virginia. Actually Vienna, I started in Vienna for a little bit and the last 8 years I've been in Williamstown.

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

CS: My dad is a insurance agent for Humana. That's actually, it wasn't Humana directly, but he's been in insurance pretty much my whole life. And that's actually one of the reasons, the reason that we moved to West Virginia. I was 18, senior in high school, when we moved to West Virginia. My mom's a stay at home mom. My grandmother moved with us as well. But that's...but I'm as of right now, I'm married. My wife Allison, and we've also got 2 children, Kayden and Kaylee.

EH: Nice. And how long have you worked at Kroger?

CS: I've been with Kroger, hang on one second.

EH: Mmhm.

CS: I've been with Kroger 13 years at the end of November 26th.

EH: Sorry, just had to put my cat out of the room because she was bothering me.

CS: I had to let my wife in the door, so we're fine.

EH: Okay great. And what's your job there?

CS: Back-up head meat cutter.

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

CS: I've been a shop steward off and on for part of the 13 years that I've been with Kroger and this last contact I was able to serve on the advisory/negotiating committee.

EH: Okay. Yeah, why don't you tell me about those recent union negotiations.

CS: I'll be honest, I mean just because of the pandemic and everything that we had to do going through the pandemic, everything was basically conducted through Zoom. At the beginning it was kinda just once a week Zoom calls where we had 3 people who did the majority of our negotiating--Bryan Bond, Jim Slavaski and Chris Hoffman, who work for the UFCW, would be the ones that talked actively with Kroger. And then about once a week and then once it started getting more intense, they would come to us to say, you know, is this something that your members would agree to? And I mean in the beginning it

was just very...Kroger is not an easy company to deal with. And it really, and especially in the beginning of the pandemic when the CEO of a company gets a 21% pay increase but yet after you know, 3 months, they take away hazard pay, which a lot of people were relying on, it really rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, and especially in the contract negotiations, one of the biggest issues that we had, Kroger tried to cut our health insurance. And I mean it nearly, it nearly caused a strike within the workforce.

EH: Was that your major concern personally too, health insurance?

04:38

CS: Yes because I mean our health insurance that we have through Kroger, and Kroger has like I said, they're not an easy company to deal with. In the past years, they made cuts on different things, and you know, our insurance is actually, I mean I've learned a lot about it, just how good our insurance is. I mean my wife is a teacher aide for the school system here and I would even say we're actively considering putting our children on my insurance because of how good our insurance is and it's something that we've had to fight to protect.

EH: Yeah. Yeah, so your wife is on the PEIA insurance?

CS: She's actually on the health plan insurance, but it's...

EH: It seemed like there were a lot of concerns with that too expressed through the teachers' strike, which still have not been resolved.

CS: Right.

EH: And so the hazard pay, was that, you said they gave that to you for 3 months. And was that \$200?

CS: It was an extra \$2 on the hour.

EH: I see.

CS: So I mean it really, if you worked 40 hours I mean it was really about, it basically equated out to \$80 out of your paycheck. But I mean Kroger's done other things too. They gave one, different one-time bonuses throughout all this, but I think the one thing that they're doing now that instead of doing this, they've, you know they'll give out fuel points, add fuel points, or they'll give \$100 credit that's loaded to people's Kroger card. Well, then that's...in a way they're giving us something but in a way they're not because this is something they're expected to be invested back into the stores.

EH: Right. So it's sort of like a company store situation--you can only spend it with your employer. So what were your actions aside from organizing on Zoom? Did you do a car caravan protest or a socially distant informational picket or anything like that?

07:17

CS: We actually did both. We did a car caravan picket and we had several informational pickets that we had in front of the stores. We kinda ramped up the intensity once it got closer to the end of the negotiations, especially once the author, we vote, got to vote on what Kroger had put on the table, which we ended up taking a strike vote on, which the strike vote passed with about 90% of the vote the first time.

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

CS: (sighs) You know, we actually did, got to sit in in bargaining a couple of times. And the first time that we sat in, they all except one, they introduced themselves and everybody was, you know, "Well thank you for your time and service," and it just, you know, they said a lot of nice things but it was the actions that they did and I'll tell you this is one, I don't know with bargaining and this is the first time I've ever seen it and I've, you know, talked to some of the older people. Cause I mean, I've only got 13 years and there's people I work with that are getting ready to retire and they've got over 40 years with the company. And one of the biggest things that Kroger did that really bothered us as a bargaining committee was, actually I went into work on a Saturday, got a, or found out our co-manager was in a conference call. She said she would talk to me and a couple of the other shop stewards when it was done. Well I went to their website that they had put out for their side of the bargaining. They basically put out the entire--I ain't gonna say it was the entire contract, but it was snippets of what really looked good. I mean they basically leaked out about 75% of the contract.

EH: Got it.

CS: Basically to go and say, you know, because they had included wage increases for a lot of the newer employees. They were basically trying to break the union and basically ran this contract down our throat.

EH: Wow.

CS: That was just something I'd never seen before in, of course this is the first time I've been in any of this situation, but really this was something that was just our division president was the one who made the decision to do this and I mean it might as well have been placing a knife right in our back.

EH: Mmhm. Yeah, so have you been involved in other union actions in the past?

CS: I have through this union, just through going to the different picket protests, like you said. Pretty much all of my experience has been with the UFCW Local 400.

EH: And what are the other things that were different than they would normally be in the pandemic, in terms of the union negotiations?

CS: Just basically doing everything through Zoom. I mean, and I'll be honest, I've said it and I made this comment the last day when we voted the contract through. I said I would do this again, I'd be happy to do this if you know, 3 and a half years this contract expires. I wouldn't mind being on the committee again if I'm asked to be. I said the one thing I would like, though, is to be able to do a lot of this face-to-face. Because a lot of the dishonesty that Kroger had done, it's a lot easier to call it out in person then it is to do it on a Zoom call.

EH: Mmhm. Right. And so did you vote at the store level too? Would that be different than what you would normally do?

CS: In the past what we've done is we've gotten people together and they usually do 2 locations. They do Charleston for one and Clarksburg at the Armory for the other one.

EH: Okay.

CS: In the past 13 years I've been to all the votes that I've been able to attend, and it's basically, the first part of it, they'll go through, they'll read the contract, they'll explain what you're voting on. I mean the

union will make a recommendation. I mean, that was one thing that we did as a committee was we recommended whether or not to accept it or reject it. And but that's one of the biggest things that we did.

EH: Yeah, why don't you tell me a little bit about your experience as an essential worker during the pandemic--you know from good to bad.

12:56

CS: Well I can tell you that as far as...I mean I can give you 2 instances as far as being 1 as being an employee and how it's affected me is coming home in the evenings, I mean, I just feel, I guess the best way to say, so dirty when I get home because you don't know what you're taking in being around the public. I just go home and I mean I don't even touch my wife or my kids. You know, my daughter is 4 years old and she want to run to the door and hug me when I get home, and I have to tell her, say, "Kaylee, I can't do that. Daddy's got to run upstairs and take a shower real quick." You know and that's something I've done pretty much since March since I've worked, since this pandemic has started, is I will go home and shower. My wife has started doing it too because of the same reasons. The other thing, as far as, and this is from a union perspective, you know and I mentioned about how Kroger had taken away our hazard pay from us. Well, you know, this was around the time that Kroger basically--this was before Governor Justice put out the mask mandate, but right around that time, Kroger had decided to mandate, following Walmart's lead, they put a mandate out for the employees to start wearing masks. Well, I hate to say this, but and a lot of times there's certain people in West Virginia that don't follow their own best interests, and they want--that was one of the biggest issues that we had was people were wanting to use, say, "Well if there's no hazard pay, then there's no hazard, right? We're not gonna wear the masks." And I had to go and tell even older people at our stores, say don't do this. You know, number 1, they can fire you for it. I mean they can take you off the schedule. Number 2, I mean, our customers are scared right now. This is something that we don't want to do anything to break their trust. I mean I saw it in a local grocery store here in Parkersburg where people were going on their Facebook page and complaining and saying they refused to shop there because the employees didn't wear masks. This was like I said before Governor Justice put out the mask mandate. I don't agree with what Kroger does, but especially with the masks and being an essential worker, those are about the 2 things that I've taken away from all of this.

EH: Yeah, and did Kroger provide masks when they issued that mandate?

CS: They have provided disposable masks and they also provided a black fabric mask that we could wear as well. The biggest problem that we have had with the masks, and especially--I work in the meat department and the big issue that me and the other people that work back there is we all 3 wear glasses. It is really bad, especially in the summertime with the humidity. Our glasses would fog up to the point, especially if we're operating a band saw, we couldn't see. And I mean we actually, we did reach an agreement with our store manager, that if we're back there cutting as long as we maintain social distance and 6 feet, you know, we didn't have to wear a mask to cut.

EH: Right. Yeah, someone else I talked to mentioned the same issue. Yeah and I guess so what are your concerns going into this winter as cases are continuing to increase?

17:14

CS: Just mainly getting the vaccine. And I will tell you this, I actually, when I was working for the union, I actually came down with COVID.

EH: Oh wow.

CS: So you know. And I'll tell ya, I mean I was fortunate. It was scary. They were talking about, wondering if I would have to go to the hospital. I didn't, but it was, but I was able to get back to work, you know. I went back, I worked a couple of days and of course I felt horrible by the second day, but then I went the next week I went out and worked on finishing up our contract negotiation and then I was on vacation for a little bit but looking ahead, the biggest thing I'm kinda--I'm trying to decide for myself if I want to get the vaccine once it does come out. And you know the other concern is, you know, just with the cases, just trying to stay safe and for me personally, I did have COVID. My wife and kids didn't get it. So I'm still trying to keep myself safe in hope that my wife, I don't bring something home to them.

EH: And did it--I know it's impossible to really tell--but it seemed like you did get it while you were at work?

CS: I do think yes, I do believe I did. I do believe it was while I was out working for the union because one of the stores that I was in was very hard hit. So I mean, I can't prove it but I do believe that more than likely I did pick it up in one of the Kroger stores, possibly.

19:14

EH: Yeah, have other of your coworkers gotten it? How have your coworkers fared?

CS: We actually, in our store alone we have had 3 including myself who did test positive and we also had another lady who, and this is just how weird this virus works--like I mentioned, you know, I got it. My wife and 2 kids did not. We had another lady in our store--everybody in her household, and this is a household of I think altogether 6 people in her house--everybody else in her house tested positive but her and she had to quit because of it. But we have had altogether, including myself, 3. Our store manager actually just came back to work today. He had actually had COVID. He got it shortly after I did and he was off for a whole month just because of lingering symptoms.

EH: Wow, yeah.

CS: Breathing trouble.

EH: Mmhm. And is your store in Williamstown?

CS: The store I work at is in Parkersburg, West Virginia. There are actually 2 stores. I work at the one on 7th Street.

EH: I see. Do you like your job?

CS: I do. And especially from the union side, this has been a rewarding experience for me because one of the things that I've wanted to try to do, and especially being a shop steward and being in this role within the union, is just mainly try to help people. And even when I had COVID, that was something--I made it public. I mean I posted on Facebook, "I did get this." It wasn't something to me to be ashamed of and once I did, I actually had some, a couple of the people that I mentioned-- one of 'em in particular did reach out to me and ask me you know, what my symptoms were and everything just to kinda...After I told 'em what happened with me, I helped them you know, if they had any questions, were getting paid through Kroger, I tried to point 'em in the right direction. But that's you know, just being able to help people, help my fellow associates, that was one of the most rewarding things through all of this and one of the reasons I'm very happy with my job.

EH: Mmhm. Nice. What's your hope for the future of the union?

CS: I just hope that we can grow and be able to maintain our membership and I think honestly, you know, people--I've talked to people since we've passed this contract and once they found that they're going from minimum wage at \$8.75 that they're gonna be going up to \$10 an hour, you know, some of the new hires, they're more excited about signing up and moving forward with us as opposed to with Right to Work, I mean Kroger has tried to use that against us and try and discourage union membership. But you know [internet skips out] what the union's been able to accomplish and you know what we fight to protect the workers, that's something that really, that I'm really positive with moving forward.

EH: Mmhm. Nice. Well is there anything else you would like to share. Great. So I have a release form to send to you that if you sign it will allow us to put this interview in our archive. So I work for the West Virginia Humanities Council and I basically do interviews with workers, traditional artists, and cultural communities all around the state and then those, the archive of those interviews goes to WVU Libraries. So I could send you that release form over email and you could snail mail it back to me or email it back to me or I could also send you a release form in the mail if that's easier.

CS: I tell you what, email it to me and I will print it off and tomorrow, I've got a copier at work that I'd be able to scan it to my email and I'll be able to send it back to you.

EH: Okay, great. Well then I'll send that right after this. Well thanks so much, Cheyne and hope you and your family have happy holidays and take care.

CS: Thank you, you too.

EH: Alright. Bye.

CS: Bye-bye.

24:22

END OF TAPE
END OF INTERVIEW