

## Denver Post Guest Commentary: Want racial justice? Start with your employees



Rachel Ellis, The Denver Post

*Nicole Trujillio, center, is hugged by a family friend at the memorial site honoring her brother Randy Narvaez, Karen Haws and James McKay, three union members who worked at local grocery stores and died of COVID-19 on the sidewalk outside of the King Soopers on 9th Avenue and Corona Street in Denver on Sunday, June 14, 2020.*

By **KIM CORDOVA** |

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As a woman of color who worked in retail grocery and the labor movement for 35 years, I'm angered by the opportunistic, half-hearted, and short-term responses by companies to address the racial disparities deeply woven into our nation.

The international protests following the death of George Floyd have finally turned the spotlight toward police and criminal justice reform. While the labor movement abhors racially motivated violence, we believe that racism cannot be cured if the systemic inequities in our economy are not addressed.

Recently, various corporations announced they will pour millions of dollars into civil rights organizations. Panicked executives across corporate America have asked their marketing gurus: "How do we follow the anti-

racist national sentiment in a way that will resonate with customers (and boost profits)?

Kroger, one of the biggest U.S. grocers making record profits during the pandemic, announced to their “Black associates, customers and allies” a \$5 million donation toward “improving diversity, equity and inclusion,” maintaining it’s “committed to doing better as a company to support racial equity and justice.”

Ironically, Kroger and Safeway just canceled the \$2-an-hour bonus for the essential workers who risk their health to keep stores running, the company rich, and communities fed. This while the [CEO Rodney McMullen received a 21% compensation increase](#) making his total compensation more than \$14 million.

This pay elimination hit our 20,000 grocery members in Colorado and Wyoming particularly hard as they mourn the loss of three Kroger employees to COVID-19. Currently, more than 90 Kroger and over 20 Safeway UFCW7 employees are COVID-19 positive.

Kroger’s donation is a minuscule step toward racial equity. Truly supporting equity starts with supporting your own people financially, and by extension their families and communities.

To be clear, donations to well-deserving civil rights organizations are important. Yet, as we watch corporate America make these donations, it begs the following question: “Where was this cash when their own employees, many of whom are low wage workers and people of color, were in need?”

Responding to national crises with splashy announcements will not fix the systemic issues of racial inequity, nor exonerate corporate America from its part in it. Corporations should ask themselves: “Are most of our executives and board white males, while most of our low wage workers people of color and women?”

The uncomfortable truth in America is that the answer to these questions is most likely yes.

To break the cycle of racism, we must address the economic imbalances in our workplace and economy that fuel a broken system, crippling Black and

Brown families' ability to get ahead, devastating minority communities, and even killing us. Action is needed to alleviate racial inequities. We cannot return to business as usual.

In just three months I've witnessed over 400 UFCW7 members get sick and many die because their employers failed to adequately protect them. Of our nine deceased members, eight were people of color and one was a white woman with Down Syndrome. [Recent national data shows deaths from COVID-19 are nearly two times greater for African-Americans than would be expected based on the national population.](#) And, in 42 states plus D.C., Latinos make up a greater share of confirmed cases than their share of the population.

Blacks Lives Do Matter. We reject police brutality. But the economic existence of African Americans and Latinos, who continue to work tirelessly as the backbone of the U.S. economy, matters as well. We call on all businesses and the government to commit to policies that will actively disrupt racist and classist practices, such as not ensuring basic workplace safety, living wages, and healthcare. This is the first step toward ensuring human dignity for all Americans.

George Floyd's death and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on working people sends a clear message to communities of color: your life is worth less. We are dying at the hands of police and racist vigilantes. But we are also dying because we must work while sick, because we cannot afford healthcare, and because our employers do not implement the most basic public health guidelines.

It is time for corporate America to acknowledge its role perpetuating an inequitable and racist economic system, then take real action implementing systemic change across the workplace.

*Kim Cordova is president of UFCW Local 7, which represents 30,000 members in Colorado and Wyoming in food processing, meat packing, agriculture, grocery, and health care.*