

Amid union activity, Grand Central Baking closes cafe

Laborers Local 483 says Sawtooth Cafe closed early after an employee protest

By Don McIntosh
Associate Editor

Grand Central Baking — a popular local chain of artisan bakeries — is facing accusations that it closed its Northwest Portland cafe months ahead of schedule in retaliation for employees there having made demands. The allegation is contained in a charge filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) by Laborers Local 483.

It's not the first time Grand Central has been scrutinized by the federal agency: In June 2013, Grand Central settled an NLRB charge that it fired cafe worker Ryan Wisnor for complaining about safety, wages, and staffing on behalf of co-workers. Grand Central agreed to reinstate Wisnor with back pay, but he was one of the eight who were then laid off in the closure of the Sawtooth Cafe, located at 2240 NW York in the industrial part of Northwest Portland.

The closure came as a shock to workers interviewed for this story. Grand Central is a successful company that has grown from a single Seattle location 25

years ago to 10 locations in Portland and Seattle today.

The closure was announced at a Jan. 4 staff meeting attended by workers from the Sawtooth Cafe and Grand Central's adjacent wholesale bakery. At the meeting, workers say, company co-owner Piper Davis announced that because wholesale bread demand was exceeding bakery capacity, Grand Central would close the Sawtooth and use the space to expand the wholesale bakery. Cafe workers didn't take the news well. Several began to cry. Davis said the closure would happen March 31, to give workers and customers time to adjust.

A week later, some of the workers asked Grand Central HR manager Paul Munoz if the company could give them preferential rehire at other locations. Munoz said no, but promised to let them know by email when positions become available. They could apply like anyone else, and give their best interview.

Then on Jan. 16, all but one of the pink-slipped workers — joined by co-workers and a dozen community supporters from Portland Jobs with Justice — marched into a manager's office to present a written demand

for the right to preferential rehir-

ing. The company didn't respond. Instead, on Jan. 22, managers called a meeting at the end of the day, and told Sawtooth Cafe workers not to come back the next day. Workers would get five weeks severance pay, and health insurance through the end of February, but the Sawtooth would close immediately — more than two months before the previously announced closure date.

Why the sped-up closure? Co-owner Davis told the Labor Press that the company didn't close the cafe early out of retaliation.

"We totally support employees' Section 7 rights," Davis said — a reference to workers' rights under the National Labor Relations Act to join a union or act in concert. Rather, the cafe was closed because it was becoming increasingly difficult to schedule, Davis said. A manager had quit months before, a worker had to be fired for leaving a safe unlocked, and remaining workers weren't flexible enough with shifts, Davis said. But several laid-off workers disputed that, saying there were enough workers available to keep the store open until March 31. The NLRB

case may hinge on which side is more plausible. It's being investigated by NLRB field attorney Lisa Dunn, who investigated Grand Central's previous charge.

Since the closure, Grand Central has made good on its pledge to notify terminated employees of new openings at other locations. But at least two have applied for open positions, and the company hasn't hired them back, even when it was the same job they did at the Sawtooth Cafe.

"It's less than I'd expect from a company that holds itself to the standards it does," said laid-off Sawtooth worker Casey Enns.

Grand Central has cultivated a reputation as an ethical business. It uses pastured eggs, humanely-raised meat, sustainably caught tuna from the Oregon coast, and flour from Northwest farmers. And its compensation is relatively high for its industry: Cafe workers make up to \$12.50 an hour, and bakers up to \$15. Employees working more than 25 hours a week get health insurance for as little as \$20 a month.

There's also one to three weeks paid vacation a year, a 25 percent 401(k) match, and quarterly profit sharing checks of up to 70 cents an hour.

Workers at the Sawtooth Cafe say they loved their jobs. Yet they may also have wanted a union. In October 2014, the Sawtooth workers began talking with Laborers Local 483.

Local 483 is a public sector local of the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA). But Local 483 also has some history fighting for low-wage workers, and recently helped a group of food service workers at the Oregon Zoo unionize.

Closing the cafe and laying off the workers appears to have nipped any union campaign in the bud. Whether the sped-up closure was done only for legitimate business reasons, or something more, NLRB will try to determine.

An online petition calling on Grand Central to rehire the workers into open positions has over 600 signatures.

Merkley introduces bill to crack down on unfair trade practices

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) has introduced a bill that would crack down on unfair trade practices and level the playing field for American manufacturing companies.

"If we don't make things in America, we won't have a middle class in America. Global trade shouldn't be a race to the bottom where countries win by allowing corporations to adopt abysmal labor and environmental practices" Merkley said at a press conference March 13 in front of the abandoned Blue Heron paper mill in Oregon City. He was joined by several laid-off workers who used to have good-paying jobs at paper mills in Oregon before they shut down and relocated overseas.

The Level the Playing Field in Global Trade Act would, for the first time, require that any new trade deals considered under Trade Promotion Authority (fast track) recognize egregious environmental and labor practices as a form of illegal subsidy that can be remedied by U.S. duties. Merkley pointed out that current U.S. law and trade agreements already prohibit

"dumping" of products, where companies export products at prices below the cost of production or cheaper than they sell for in the home country. The law allows the U.S. to impose duties to make the sale price in America reflect what the true cost would be without cheating.

The Act would reward companies that adhere to high global standards by creating new trade enforcement incentives.

"As we debate our future trade policy, we need to make sure that we're not allowing the deck to be permanently stacked against American manufacturing," Merkley said. "On a level playing field, American manufacturing and American workers can compete with the best in the world. Let's create that level playing field by counting vastly sub-standard wage and environmental standards as exactly what they are — unfair subsidies that cost jobs and damage manufacturers who play by the rules."

The Level the Playing Field in Global Trade Act is co-sponsored by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI).



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