

Fast food union empties out Burgerville – on game night

On the night of the Trail Blazers season opening game, a lively protest targeted a Burgerville three blocks from Moda Center.

By Don McIntosh

Supporters of the Burgerville Workers Union surrounded the Convention Center Burgerville restaurant Oct. 25, turning away customers on an evening that might otherwise have been one of the busiest for the restaurant. The Convention Center Burgerville at 1135 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard is three blocks from the Moda Center sports arena, and the Portland Trail Blazers were holding their season opening game there on Oct. 25. As fans streamed toward the arena, pro-union demonstrators, including one dressed in a french fry costume, handed out printed placards: On one side was the Blazers logo to wave in support of the team; on the other side, the crossed-spatula logo of the Burgerville Workers Union.

Meanwhile, roving lines of picketers at the restaurant's two entrances deterred cars from entering, idling the drive-through. And union picketers invited potential Burgerville customers who were on foot to turn away and enjoy free union burgers instead — at a double-grill hamburger trailer set up directly in front of the store. A few still crossed the picket line and entered the restaurant, but others kept going or accepted the union burgers.

The protest was called to mark six months since the public launch of the Burgerville Workers Union, a grassroots organization affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Burgerville Workers Union is calling for a \$5 an hour



Above: Supporters hand out Burgerville Workers Union placards to Blazers fans. Below: the rat that appeared outside. Right: What every restaurant should look like if it's behind a union picket line — empty.



raise for all hourly workers, plus more affordable health benefits, and scheduling and safety improvements. But at least initially the union isn't claiming to have the support of the majority of workers at the 42-store regional



chain — or seeking an election to be certified as their exclusive representative.

U.S. labor law recognizes the right of workers to band together for mutual aid and protection, and to take collective action —

whether or not they seek government-sanctioned certification as a union.

"We're not opposed to signing a contract, but we don't need that to be a union," said Luis Brennan, a worker at Burgerville's

Portland airport location. "We're already functioning as a union. We're concretely supporting workers every day."

The Burgerville Workers Union campaign has been endorsed by the state and local AFL-CIO, and the Oct. 25 picket was supported by Portland Jobs With Justice and several unions. United Brotherhood of Carpenters Local 1503 provided and supplied the hamburger trailer. Laborers Local 737 lent the use of their fearsome-looking inflatable rat. And members and leaders of at least half a dozen unions took part in the demonstration.

Burgerville has so far refused to meet with the union officially. CEO Jeff Harvey did meet with an official designee of the union but insisted on treating what she had to say as her own individual viewpoint instead of the collective voice of a group of employees. Since the campaign began, at least one known union supporter has been terminated, and another was persuaded to resign. The union has filed six charges with the National Labor Relations Board alleging company violations of federal labor law. Two have since been withdrawn; the others are still pending investigation.

But Brennan credits small-scale acts of solidarity with small workplace improvements, like a 50-cent raise, a floor mat added at one location, and a manager who told a sick worker to stay on the job but came around after getting a call from the union. And in general, Brennan said, company managers seem to be on their best behavior since the union launched.

And the Blazers? They had a 113-104 win in the season opener against the Utah Jazz.

WASHINGTON

Unions plan 'unwelcoming' ceremony at opening of first Seattle-area New Seasons

Portland-based New Seasons Market, backed by deep-pocketed private equity firm Endeavour Capital, is opening its first Seattle-area store Nov. 10 on Mercer Island.

But members and allies of Seattle-based United Food and Commercial Workers Local 21 will be there that day to send the message that out-of-state, low-road grocery chains aren't welcome.

The Seattle area already has two popular local chains in the natural foods niche: consumer co-op PCC Natural Market and for-profit Metropolitan Market. Both are unionized and provide living wages and benefits.

Not so New Seasons, which is entirely non-union. Workers at the Mercer Island New Seasons will have to work twice as many hours to qualify for health benefits as union workers at the QFC across the street, and will have to pay three times as much for those benefits.

NATIONAL

Video game actors on strike

After 19 months of unsuccessful negotiation, hundreds of SAG-AFTRA-represented voice actors, stunt performers and actors who do motion capture work went on strike Oct. 21 against Electronic Arts, Disney and nine other video game producers. The key issue: Actors want performance bonuses if games go blockbuster and sell over 2 million copies, just like actors in TV and film get residual payments. Safety is also an issue: Long recording sessions

can be dangerous to vocal chords, especially if screaming is involved.

Strike ends at Jim Beam distilleries in Kentucky

The whiskey rebellion is over. Members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 111D voted 204-19 on Oct. 21 to accept a new company offer and end a week-long strike at Jim Beam distilleries in Clermont and Boston, Kentucky.

The strike wasn't about wages or benefits; it was about

overwork. Workers were tired of having to work 60 or even 80 hours a week because the company wasn't hiring enough staff.

The new contract limits mandatory overtime to four hours per shift, caps the number of temporary employees, and commits the company to hire more full-time employees. It also raises wages and eliminates a two-tiered pay system. Wages start at \$23 per hour at the two plants. The Jim Beam brand is owned by Suntory Holdings Ltd., a Japanese beverage company