Burgerville union campaign marks one year

Members and supporters of the Burgerville Workers Union marked their campaign's one year anniversary by demonstrating outside a handful of local Burgerville restaurants April 26.

At the fast food chain's Southeast 26th and Powell location, across the street from Cleveland High School, union supporters handed out free pizza to students — while making an appeal not to eat lunch at Burgerville that day. Students enthusiastically took them up on the deal, and many agreed to wear union pins that read "Cleveland Stands With Burgerville Workers Union."

At other locations, supporters entered restaurants and locked arms in front of the counter, briefly shutting down sales.

The Convention Center location has been repeatedly targeted by union demonstrations, including a Feb. 25 demonstration in which over 100 members of SEIU Local 49 marched into the store holding signs, and an Oct. 25 demonstration at which supporters surrounded the store and handed out free burgers supplied by the Carpenters Union.

Burgerville Workers Union, affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World, is calling for a $5 an hour raise for all Burgerville workers. They currently make at or near the legal minimum wage.

Corporate has not been friendly to the union effort: In letters and a video all employees were made to watch, Burgerville CEO Jeff Harvey argued against a union, saying it would not be in the best interest of employees. And several open union supporters have been fired by the company since the campaign launched.

"Cleveland Stands With Burgerville Workers Union," says pins designed by Burgerville worker Emmaly Light, a 2014 Cleveland High School grad. Light says she likes her job at the 26th and Powell Burgerville, and hasn't experienced management backlash for her support of the union. But she'd like the company to allow tip jars, and provide mats or stools to lessen strain on drive-through workers. She looks to the union as a way for workers to get improvements like that. "I believe we'll be able to get more done as a group than as individuals," Light said.

At the Vancouver Plaza Burgerville, union supporter Jordan Vaandering was fired Jan. 18, ostensibly for failing to pay for a bagel that a manager served him while on break. The next day he marched with supporters into the store and demanded his job back. Burgerville called the police and had him arrested for trespass.

Since Burgerville Workers Union publicly announced itself on April 26, 2016, their campaign has received a statement of support from Bernie Sanders, and endorsement by the Oregon AFL-CIO and half a dozen other labor organizations. Union members and supporters have engaged in a variety of tactics, including brief store occupations and wildcat placement of tip jars (soon taken down by managers). In February, the union announced the launch of a benefits program, including food boxes, discounted bus passes, up to 4 hours a month of free babysitting, and GED test preparation classes.

The union has so far stopped short of calling for an ongoing boycott of the 42-store chain.

MORE:
Find out more about the Burgerville Workers Union at burgervilleworkersunion.org, and keep up with the latest developments by liking the group's page at facebook.com/burgervilleworkersunion

Is that what they call the Portland Spirit?

A riverboat owner's rant against recent pro-worker laws turns away a union convention host

American Postal Workers Union (APWU) is considering Portland for a national health plan conference, so the union's national president asked Portland-based APWU Local 128 legislative director Daniel Cortez to do some advance ground work. Cortez was to research options for delegates to socialize — like a cocktail mixer or river cruise — something to showcase Portland after a day of meetings. Cortez thought: What about a Willamette River dinner cruise aboard the Portland Spirit? As Cortez reported to delegates at the April 24 meeting of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, a trip to the company's web site made him drop that idea.

On the site, company president Dan Yates bemoans all the burdens he suffers from recent acts of government: a significant minimum wage increase, paid sick leave, a "ban the box" policy barring employers from asking about felony convictions on the initial employment application. And now, horror of horrors, the state of Oregon may institute "Two Week Schedules" for all employees, Yates writes, "with potential penalties for employers that reduce or add hours to an employee's schedule." What is a low-wage employer of 250 mostly part-time employees to do? For Yates, the answer is: Charge extra fees — and let the public know why.

Oregon unions fought for all the policies Yates complained about — to help some of the poorest workers in the state. So APWU won't be patronizing the Portland Spirit, Cortez decided. Yates, a member of the Portland Business Alliance, may have complained himself out of several hundred customers.