

## Guest Opinion

By Will Layng Executive Director of Portland Jobs with Justice



### Does Burgerville really 'serve with love'?

Growing up in a Presbyterian family in Atlanta in the '80s, I learned important lessons about faith, religion, and food. One thing I learned was that after the blessing before dinner, it was best to avoid talk of religion until we finished eating. Very few things can make you feel less welcome than someone trying to stuff their religious beliefs down your throat along with your mashed potatoes.

As the Executive Director of Portland Jobs with Justice, I've been surprised to learn that Vancouver-based Burgerville and its longtime leader, Tom Mears, think very differently about religion and food. Mears wrote a book in 2017 called 'Serve With Love,' which tells the story of how Burgerville transformed itself into a "mission led" company, based on lofty principles: upholding the dignity of all, making health care available for employees, and helping workers grow and succeed.

While most Christians would support those principles at face value, we should look deeper at what Mears' book is actually serving up. The book is promoted by a global organization called the Nehemiah Project, which exists to train "kingdom companies" in "Biblical entrepreneurship™". And if you are scratching your head wondering what that means, you can pay the Nehemiah Project \$3,770 to get certified in it at one of their seminars!

Like a day-old french fry, it gets more unappetizing. Burgerville workers throughout the Portland area have been involved in a two year

effort to organize a union to win fair wages and enough hours to be able to support themselves, affordable health care so they can take care of themselves, and a voice at work. Workers have won elections to recognize their union at two stores and recently won another election at a third store in Portland. However, Burgerville has been hostile to workers' organizing, and has been slow in negotiating a contract with workers at the unionized stores. The company's anti-union campaign led to an ongoing boycott and regular strikes and pickets at several stores.

Turns out that Mears is just part of the Christian corporate filler involved in this recipe. The website for Serve With Love has an endorsement from a retired Wells Fargo executive, Jeff

Grubb. Grubb is a paid trustee of another Vancouver-based entity, the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, a \$1.2 billion endowed foundation. The Murdock Trust, among many laudable grants and investments, granted almost \$1 million to the Alliance Defending Freedom, an anti-LGBTQ hate group founded by James Dobson. They also gave nearly \$500,000 to the Freedom Foundation, an anti-worker group opposing minimum wage improvements, paid sick days, and public employee unions.

Dealing fairly with real life employees demanding justice and ending connections with hate groups and anti-worker foundations seem like great ways to live out Mears' and Burgerville's words. We can talk about Biblical entrepreneurship™ after everyone has eaten.

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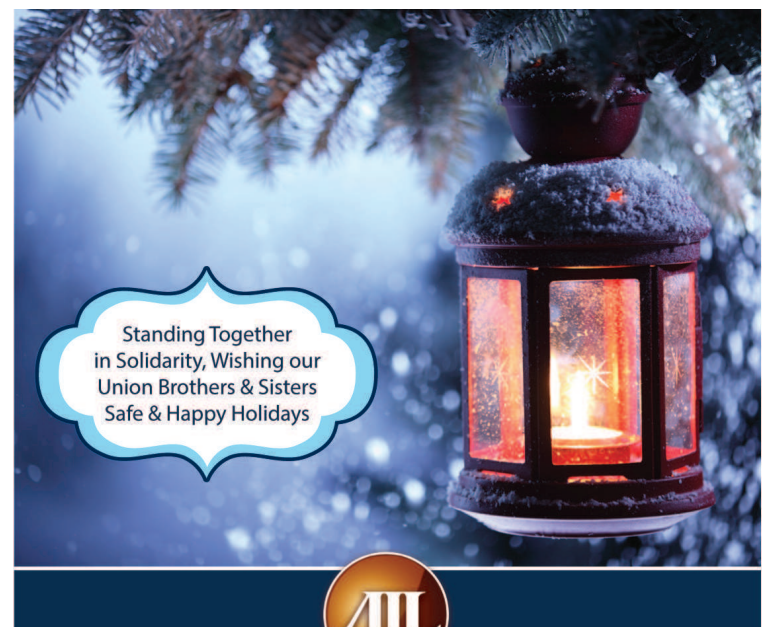
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