

# A flag to fly to support, commemorate construction workers

Many people are familiar with the “Thin Blue Line” flag — a black and white U.S. flag with a blue line in the middle, meant to show support for police officers (who are said to be a thin blue line separating order from chaos), and to honor officers killed in the line of duty. Supporters of other occupations have borrowed the colored line flag idea. A “Thin Red Line” flag honors firefighters injured or killed in the line of duty. There’s also a dark-green-line flag for Border Patrol agents, a white for EMS workers, yellow for dispatchers, and gray for corrections officers.

The building trades will soon have its own “Thin Green Line” flag to show support for workers in the construction industry.

The brainchild of Mark Gon-

zalez, a recently retired training director for the Northern California Cement Masons Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee, the Construction Industry flag won support from the California Apprenticeship Council. CAC is comprised of union and nonunion training programs.

Gonzalez told the Labor Press he got the idea a few years ago while on vacation. “I saw a firefighter and police flag flying on a couple of RVs and thought to myself, ‘The building trades needs to have a flag like that representing



the construction industry.”

Gonzalez took the idea to the California Apprenticeship Coordinators Association, a group that represents union training programs. They endorsed it and made a recommendation to CAC. A subcommittee reviewed it, a state-required public comment period was held, and last August CAC unanimously approved it.

widely used in safety vests in the construction industry.

At a recent state conference of the Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons’ International Association, Gonzalez shared the news with General President Daniel Stepano. Stepano will present a flag to each building trades union general president at

their annual meeting in April. The meeting takes place prior to North America’s Building Trades Unions legislative conference in Washington, D.C., which attracts union reps from throughout the country.

Meanwhile, the California Apprenticeship Coordinators Association has ordered several hundred 3”-by-5” decal stickers to hand out to construction workers.

“The sticker and flag will represent a show of support for construction workers wherever it is displayed,” said Gonzalez, adding that the flag also will be flown whenever a construction worker is injured or killed on the job.

For more information about the flag, contact Gonzalez at 831-484-4096.

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## ...Schultz

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anti-union workers filed for a decertification election to vote the union out. Again the company held meetings. But the Feb. 28, 2001, vote was 11 to 8 in favor of the union.

To get a contract, the union and its supporters tried to ratchet up the pressure. They talked to Schultz’s rabbi. They picketed outside Schultz’s Seattle mansion, alongside a 12-foot rat balloon. At a Starbucks shareholder meeting at Seattle’s Beniroya Hall, Alexander showed up in jeans and flannel to confront Schultz and other company executives.

“Is Starbucks anti-union?” he remembers asking at the microphone. He says the mic then went dead. Security surrounded him and escorted him out.

Back at the roasting plant, police were called to respond to a parking lot altercation involving pro- and anti-union workers. An anti-union co-worker threatened to kill Alexander. Alexander told management he wouldn’t return to work unless they could assure his safety. Instead, he says, they paid him to go away. He went back to work at the meat processing plant.

Six months later, his former co-workers got their union contract. It had no significant wage gains, no pension, and the weakest benefits of any contract the local had ever negotiated.

In 2002, Alexander went to



Jeff Alexander

work at Local 286, first as a union organizer, later as a rep.

By the time the Starbucks union contract expired in 2004, the most stalwart union workers were gone. Anti-union workers again filed for a decertification, and this time the union walked away, knowing it had only half a dozen supporters remaining.

Not long after that, a woman showed up at the union hall with a remarkable story. Working at Starbucks in human resources, she’d been told by superiors to throw out the applications of anyone who’d ever worked union their entire career. When she refused, she was fired. Local 286 got a lawyer and helped her file charges saying Starbucks conduct violated federal labor law. The National Labor Relations Board agreed. To settle the case, Starbucks agreed to pay \$125,000 to the fired HR employee, and \$5,000 each to eight former union members who had been interviewed, but not hired.

To this day, Alexander says he would never set foot in a Starbucks — and it burns him up to see Starbucks served at union events or in rooms at unionized hotels.

## Howard Schultz: Billionaire union-buster

■ **Busting UFCW** In 1986, when Schultz joined Starbucks management, it was a Seattle-area gourmet coffee chain, and shop and roasting plant workers were represented by UFCW Local 1001.

Starbucks demanded concessions including medical benefit cuts and an end to “just cause” discipline. Schultz encouraged workers to vote out the union, and they did, first in retail stores and then at the Seattle roasting plant.

■ **Busting the Operating Engineers** In 1999, when machine maintenance workers at Starbucks’ Kent, Washington, roasting plant sought to join Operating Engineers Local 286, Schultz attended an anti-union meeting and made a personal appeal to vote no. They voted yes anyway, but an unrelenting anti-union campaign took its toll by 2004, and the union lost support after just one hard-fought contract.

■ **Busting IWW** In 2004, when workers at Starbucks stores in New York City and elsewhere started campaigning with Industrial Workers of the World, Schultz sent a company-wide voicemail saying how disturbed and disappointed he was by that, and visited the store where the campaign began. Store managers then forbade employees from discussing the union inside the store, transferred anti-union workers to stores that had union activity, fired union supporters in New York and Minneapolis, and banned workers from wearing pro-union buttons. In the face of the onslaught, the union effort fizzled. But Starbucks kept fighting in court and in 2012, the U.S. Court of Appeals agreed they could bar workers from wearing more than one union button.