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UNION ORGANIZING

Fast food workers launch union at Little Big Burger

PORTLAND — A new fast food union launched publicly March 16 when a group of Little Big Burger employees — accompanied by over 100 picket-sign-wielding supporters — presented a letter seeking union recognition to a restaurant manager at the company’s 930 NW 23rd Ave location.

“We are asking them to voluntarily recognize us, let us organize freely, and not union bust,” Little Big Burger employee Ashley Reyes told the Labor Press.

The new union, dubbed Little Big Union, is affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World, the labor organization behind Burgerville Workers Union. A press statement announcing the union said worker grievances include low wages, too few hours, short-staffing, poor training, and unprofessional behavior by management.

Little Big Burger serves a simple menu of small hamburgers, truffle fries and root beer floats, “in a fun and hip atmosphere,” as the company web site puts it. The company was founded in 2010 by Portland restaurateurs Micah Camden and Katie Poppe, the duo who later started Blue Star Donuts and Boxer Ramen. They sold Little Big Burger in 2015 for \$6.1 million to Chanticleer Holdings, Inc., the North Carolina based company that owns Hooters. But by then, a group of Little Big



Burger employees had filed a class action suit against the company over unpaid overtime. The lead plaintiff in the lawsuit said Little Big Burger fired him for complaining about the unpaid overtime and for suggesting to co-workers that they take action to get paid. Using funds Chanticleer had set aside out of the purchase price, Camden and Poppe settled the lawsuit in February 2016 for \$675,000, including \$225,000 for attorney fees.

Today Little Big Burger has 20 locations: 12 in the Portland metro area, one each in Eugene and Austin, and three each in Seattle and North Carolina.

Reyes, 23, said she gets minimum wage and no benefits after 17 months working at Little Big Burger. But she and co-workers have already seen collective action get results, she said: Workers signed a petition asking for safety slip mats ... and got immediate agree-

ment from Little Big Burger management.

“I love my co-workers,” Reyes said. “I think we’re worth fighting for.”

On its web site, Little Big Union says members want a transparent pay scale and raises of \$5 an hour, health insurance benefits, two weeks paid vacation, child care, paid parental leave, bus and parking passes, food boxes, and shift beers. They also want an end to at-will employment, the right to refuse service to abusive customers, a commitment to fix or replace tools and machinery in a timely manner, and to not use E-verify check workers’ documentation status.

Little Big Burger media relations did not respond to an email from the *Labor Press*. Portland regional manager Adrian Oca told Little Big Union in an email that the company won’t voluntarily recognize the union, but is willing to meet.

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