

UNION ORGANIZING

Union crushed at Eugene metal distributor FarWest Steel

By Don McIntosh

Amid charges of serious violations of federal labor law, a union campaign at FarWest Steel in Eugene ended Sept. 4 with a lopsided vote against the United Steelworkers (USW).

It was a sad conclusion for a campaign that union organizer Jim Kilborn says began with high hopes and great momentum.

FarWest Steel is a steel and rebar distributor with a dozen locations in five Western states. At its facility at 2000 Henderson Ave. in Eugene, it employs 126 workers, including drivers and warehouse workers, equipment operators, maintenance technicians and mechanics, and welders. They store and ship steel stock like steel rod, I-beams, bars and tubing, and do some light fabrication.

But without a union, the workers there are at the whim of management: Managers make every decision, and workers have no say over job opportunities, pay and benefits, nor any right to fairness in discipline. That, and a desire for seniority rights to counteract management favoritism, motivated workers to want to unionize, Kilborn said.

The campaign began with energy: 28 workers came out to the first meeting, and Kilborn — former president of USW Local

6163 at the ATI Wah Chang specialty alloys plant in Albany — explained what a union is and how to get it.

“They were charged. They were ready,” Kilborn recalls.

The union supporters set out to sign up their co-workers, and within two weeks, three-fifths of the workplace had signed union authorization cards.

Word of the campaign must have leaked to management, however: Managers who seldom left the office started showing up on shop floor asking workers about morale. Several of the more active union supporters were called into the office and angrily interrogated by management.

On the morning of Aug. 5, the union emailed management and asked the company for voluntary recognition, a standard first step before asking the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to hold a union election.

A chilling response

The company’s reaction was swift and brutal. At four in the afternoon, at the end of their shift, four union supporters were summoned to the office and without explanation told they were being “laid off.” Another, who worked graveyard, was let go the next day. These were some of the company’s most senior employ-

ees, who’d given much of their lives to the company. One had worked for the company for 33 years, another 24 years, and two for 13 years. And even as it was terminating the five union supporters, FarWest was advertising on Craigslist that it was hiring, Kilborn says.

“It scared people ... It shut the whole campaign down. Everybody went underground.”

—USW rep Jim Kilborn

“It was very clear,” Kilborn said. “Those who were supportive of the union took it as they were fired for their union activity.”

“It scared people, even the whole [union organizing] committee,” Kilborn said. “It shut the whole campaign down. Everybody went underground.”

Not allowed on the property, Kilborn set up at the plant gate to distribute union literature and talk with workers on their way in or out. But very few union supporters would join him, and few workers seemed to want to be seen talking with him.

The NLRB set a date for a union election: Sept. 4. FarWest

began scheduling hours-long paid-attendance anti-union meetings in the employee break room. Oregon law says employers can’t require workers to attend anti-union meetings, but after the firings, Kilborn says no one refused to go.

At the meetings, managers brought in anti-union workers from other shifts and departments who made threatening and aggressive comments about union supporters. Later, the meetings were led by a smooth-talking professional union-buster in suspenders who showed slides listing companies that had unionized and then moved operations elsewhere.

On graveyard shift, where union support was strong, numerous workers were reassigned to swing and day shift.

As the election approached, anti-union workers went around the workplace wearing T-shirts that said, “I speak for myself.”

“And all the while, we, the union, had no ability to get in there to the facility and talk to the workers,” Kilborn said.

On the day of the union election, turnout was very high: All but five of the 126 workers voted. The union went down, hard: 86 to 28. In the month between the petition and the election, union support had dropped from 67% to

25%.

It’s illegal for an employer to fire a worker for supporting a union. It’s also distressingly common: Studies have found that employers fire one or more union supporters in more than one third of all union campaigns. It’s the job of NLRB agents to investigate and prosecute such firings, but the agency’s legal remedies are painfully slow and laughably weak. In the best case scenario, with clear evidence of an anti-union motive in the firing, the agency can order that workers be reinstated with back pay — minus any pay they might have earned from another job after they were fired. Companies that are willing to break the law view that sanction as a small price to pay for a proven tactic to crush a union campaign by putting workers in fear of losing their livelihoods.

In charges with the NLRB, USW accuses FarWest of illegally firing the union supporters, interrogating workers about their support for the union, and unlawfully changing terms and conditions to undercut the union campaign. An NLRB investigation is pending.

FarWest human resources director Melissa Dugan and branch manager Dave Hendricks did not respond to requests for comment.

...Medical techs unionize at St. Charles

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commonly increased by up to 10 on-call hours, Munro was no longer considered full-time, and her contribution to health premiums went up monumentally.

After the union campaign got started, St. Charles gave technologists 2% and 1% raises. It also campaigned against the union in one-on-one and group meetings and direct appeals from hospital president Aaron Adams.

“I am humbly asking you to vote ‘no’ in this election,” Adams wrote in an Aug. 28 letter to workers. “I would like time to work directly with you to address your critical issues and concerns.”

“I think a lot of us, three to one, humbly declined,” Munro told the Labor Press, “You know, we’ve been asking for all of these things for years.”

“We’ve seen what the nurses have been able to do with their union.”

— Judy Munro, radiological technologist



“You can’t make management respect you,” says Enghouse, the OFNHP president. “But you can hold them accountable for the way they treat you. And that’s what a contract does for you.”

Despite opposition from St. Charles management, Enghouse said workers ran a positive campaign. But if the past is any guide, their effort may have just begun: A unit of 600 service and maintenance workers at St. Charles voted narrowly to join SEIU Local 49 in 2011, but were unable to get an acceptable first contract, and 21 months later, voted to go non-union again.

But technologists say their campaign has already had an impact: Across different departments, they’ve gotten to know each other, and they feel more unified.

“We’re a union — it just means ‘together,’” says X-ray technician Russ Amundson.

“I don’t think a lot of people get a chance to be part of a small revolution in their lives,” Amundson told the Labor Press. “This has made every day at work better. I’ve met all these people that normally I would have just walked by and smiled at. Now I know all these people. I know they’re professionals. And now they’re friends.”

UNIONIZATION ➔ JULY-AUG 2019

The following are Oregon and Southwest Washington workplaces where workers have decided whether to be represented by a union. The thumbs-up symbol means workers will be union-represented. Thumbs-down means they’ll be on their own. The information comes from the National Labor Relations Board and the Oregon Employment Relations Board.

Union election results

Employer (Location) Union	Yes-No	
Little Big Burger (Portland) Little Big Union/IWW ■ 109 workers at all Portland-area locations	29-41	👎
Sierra Springs Bottled Water (Portland) Teamsters Local 206 ■ 14 loaders, production operators, and warehouse workers	2-12	👎
Tuality Community Hospital (Hillsboro) Oregon Nurses Association ■ 17 RNs in the geriatric psychology unit, to join an existing bargaining unit of nurses	9-2	👍



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