

UNION ORGANIZING

At Portland icon Voodoo Doughnuts, workers form a union

Feeling unsafe at a crowded and stressful donut shop that pays at or near minimum wage, workers have nowhere to go but up.

By Don McIntosh

Workers at the downtown location of Voodoo Doughnut announced March 20 that they've formed a union, affiliated with the Portland chapter of Industrial Workers of the World.

They're unionizing in response to low wages and unsafe and stressful working conditions, says Voodoo Doughnut employee Samantha Bryce. Workers start at minimum wage (\$12.50) and later get a \$0.75 raise. And they feel unsafe: The shop is open 24 hours a day in a high-crime section of downtown Portland. Bryce says workers suffer regular assaults. But Voodoo doesn't employ a security guard. On March 9, the store was robbed by a man brandishing a hatchet.

"We are expected as employees to take care of all security, though we've never been trained, and have no resources to deal with it," Bryce told the Labor Press.

The union effort has been covertly under way since last June, and was on track to launch soon, but the coronavirus crisis sped up the timeline. The outbreak also



added new demands to the list: severance for several dozen workers who were laid off last week due to the COVID-19 crisis, and the right to cash out accrued paid time off. The shop remains open, though seating has been removed.

Bryce says the Voodoo Doughnut Workers Union (VWU) has support from a majority of the workers — both the 52 who were employed before the layoff and the roughly 30 who remain. Workers

are asking the company's owners to voluntarily recognize the union and meet to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement for the downtown location.

Voodoo top brass did not respond to a message from the Labor Press.

Voodoo was founded in 2002 by former rock club owner Tres Shannon and his friend Kenneth "Cat Daddy" Pogson as a cash-only late-night donut shop serving punk-rock versions of classic donuts

to downtown bar and night club patrons. But its signature pink boxes of phallus-shaped donuts came to be regarded as a hip souvenir of "Portland weird" to out-of-towners, who'd line up for a block outside its downtown store. By 2014, as portrayed in a first-person account published in *Willamette Week*, the company had become a heartless high-turnover sweatshop where workers faced swift termination if they didn't get customers out the door quickly and up-sell gullible tourists. Since 2018, Voodoo has been run by former MOD Pizza chain executive Chris Schultz. Today, Voodoo has nine locations, including stores in Austin, Houston, Denver, Hollywood, Orlando, and Eugene. For now, the union effort is only at the downtown Portland location.

In a way, Voodoo is a great symbol of Portland, a once affordable DIY mecca that polarized economically amid a torrent of progressive hipster hype. The Voodoo union eruption may be a sign of the times.

MORE

For updates, follow the union at the Skunkline Workers Union Facebook page. [That was the code name for the union drive; a skunk line is the line around the donut being fried.]



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