

Organic foods supplier leaves local workers hungry

Food distribution plant that supplies grocery stores like Whole Foods in a fight for their livelihood

BY TRACEY A. THOMPSON
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Like it? Share it! With seven kids under the age of 10, Joe Taufao has a lot of hungry mouths to feed. It's always been a struggle to put enough food on the table, but especially now, with his wife laid off, and Joe and his coworkers on strike. "Our landlord told us, 'Pay the rent now or get out,'" Joe said. "I told him we were on strike. He didn't care."

Homelessness can often start with a heartless landlord or an unscrupulous boss. Joe has both. He sought a break on his rent because his employer, United Natural Foods Inc. (UNFI), has taken a ruthless, anti-union stance, forcing him and his coworkers out on the picket line.

UNFI is the largest organic foods distributor in the country and the main supplier for upscale grocers such as Whole Foods. UNFI has a virtual monopoly on the market. The vast majority of organic food and natural products on the shelves of high-end supermarkets across the country are supplied by UNFI.

Joe works as a back stocker in the freezer and can't afford to shop at the places UNFI supplies. But he and his 167 coworkers at the company's Auburn, Wash. distribution center are instrumental in bringing food to the table of the people who can. He has worked at UNFI for seven years and seen the company grow from a small, locally owned niche market wholesaler to the corporate food conglomerate it is today.

With UNFI's expansion have come enormous profits. The company raked in half a billion dollars in profits last year and

has enjoyed an 18 percent profit margin in each of the past five years. In 2011, it paid its executives handsomely: over \$10 million in total compensation. As it has grown, UNFI has demanded greater productivity from its workers; at the same time, it has been unwilling to share its profits with workers.

UNFI employees perform the same work as other workers in the unionized grocery warehouse industry, yet they are paid 25 percent less than other unionized grocery warehouse and distribution workers in the Puget Sound region. During contract negotiations with Teamsters Local 117, UNFI refused to bargain over the compensation disparity and committed dozens of additional unfair labor practices in violation of federal law.

"The success of this company was built off our backs," said Robert Jurey, a 13-year warehouse worker at UNFI. "But rather than treating us with respect, UNFI is spending hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars to intimidate us into accepting a substandard proposal."

In protest of the company's unlawful conduct, workers went on an unfair labor practice strike on Dec. 10. The strike was intended to serve as a wake-up call to compel UNFI to return to the bargaining table and to bargain in good faith.

After a three-day strike, workers made an unconditional offer to return to work, which UNFI accepted. Workers took down the picket lines and bargaining dates were set. But when employees reported to work the

following day, they learned that the company had no intention of honoring its commitment.

Instead, UNFI announced that Joe and 71 of his co-workers — nearly half of the Auburn, Wash. workforce — would be permanently replaced. It is unlawful for an employer to permanently replace its workers in an unfair labor practice strike, yet that is exactly what UNFI did.

Workers at UNFI are now in their second month on strike. They have held strong,

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stood together and shown tremendous courage, integrity and solidarity in the face of a lawless, adversarial billion-dollar employer that is driven only by its own greed.

But they need your support. You can urge, Whole Foods or your local food co-op to use a supplier that shares your values.

You can join the more than 2,500 people who have already signed an online petition and donate to the Workers' Hardship Fund at unfidrivendygreed.com.

By standing up to UNFI, workers such as Joe and Robert have shown that they will not be bullied. They have vowed to continue their fight for justice, not only for themselves and their families, but also for all working men and women in this country.

Tracey A. Thompson is the principal officer of Teamsters Local 117, which represents approximately 16,000 working men and women in Washington.



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