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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Unions are Good for Business

Tuesday, March 12, 2024 | 10:00 a.m.

Representative Nick Pisciotano

OPENING REMARKS

10:00 a.m. Rep. Nick Pisciotano, D-Allegheny

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

10:05 a.m. Jean Swoope, Owner
Coffee Tree Roasters

Leonard Purnell, Field Services Director
UFCW Local 1776

Ryan Harding, Employee, Union Member
Coffee Tree Roasters, UFCW Local 1776

Joint Testimony of UFCW Local 1776, Workers and Coffee Tree Ownership
Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing - March 12, 2024

Members of the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing:

We thank you for the opportunity today to talk about a very unique and positive story of union organizing, worker-employer collaboration and a path forward for business and labor to be able to work together.

We are here today at Coffee Tree Roasters in Shadyside, one of four coffee shops where workers successfully organized their union and were able to come to a fair and decent labor contract with ownership in a relatively quick fashion.

This is no small feat. A quick internet search can show workers all through our country seeking union representation and a stronger voice in their workplace. While there are numerous organizing wins throughout the country, the second step of securing a labor contract ratified by workers and being agreed to by employers is a tricky task.

We want the focus of our testimony to highlight the bargaining process that led to improvements for both workers and business that have been made through the collaborative process of collective bargaining.

To start, we should all address some of the facts. Many of you were part of the organizing campaign when workers in December 2021 petitioned the National Labor Relations Board to file for a union with UFCW at Coffee Tree Roasters. Without getting into all the details, we can all acknowledge it has led to positive progress from the rocky road we all started on.

For the union, this was our first organizing drive in this sector with workers in a small business coffee shop. For the workers, they of course were trying to find the best course of action to have their voices heard with management. And for ownership, there was a large unfamiliarity with the union organizing process and a perceived “boogeyman” that a union can be for business.

So in short, it was a tough start.

Going forward, the workers at Coffee Tree won their union election in February 2022. Ownership acknowledged that decision from the workers. And the collective bargaining process started. The fighting took a pause.

That is where I think we get to the positive part of this process – the conversations and bargaining sessions that led to a first union contract and a Better Coffee Tree for all.

For multiple bargaining sessions, a collaborative open dialogue began. Workers began an organized process of expressing ideas they wanted to convey to ownership. Ownership began to identify the key challenges small businesses face. Workers put labor contract proposals on the table, as did ownership. We identified shared alignment on key priorities between workers and business, and fairly negotiated over the areas we disagreed on.

Bargaining took place over several sessions. Finally, on September 2022 the workers, the union and ownership shook hands and presented a first tentative labor agreement back to the workers for their consideration. The agreement provided immediate wage increases, an improved electronic tip system, mechanisms to include better communication between workers and management, updated scheduling practices, new overtime provisions and more. Further, this contract established a process for fair and honest dialogue between parties to make sure both workers and business could flourish together.

This labor contract was overwhelmingly ratified by the workers. And from that point, Pittsburgh now has a woman-owned, small business chain of union coffee shops. A ton of credit belongs to everyone in this process, and it shouldn't be dismissed the professionalism showed by both sides to get to a fair agreement for everyone.

We don't want to downplay the significance of this. This was not an easy process. There wasn't a straight and easy path to get here. But through some of the differences and struggles on the front end, we collectively ended up with a more productive and honest process on the back end.

Since UFCW 1776 members have ratified this labor contract, we have been very proud of the progress made between workers and ownership. We have embraced this new way thinking about worker empowerment and small business empowerment. When the bargaining process is fair – and we should emphasize that that process isn't always fair - no union is trying to bankrupt an employer, and no employer is trying to dictate terms to their workers. If workers and employers can have a true collective bargaining process with a fair dialogue, that is a result that works for everyone.

We look forward to work that will continue here at Coffee Tree. We appreciate the support for our union coffee shops throughout the Pittsburgh region. We are proud of the standard that has been set here, and while we are sure we may not always see eye to eye on every issue, we do believe an open line of communication has been established to try and resolve issues that may arise in the future.

Thinking about the lessons we have learned from this process, the biggest one is trying to establish a line of communication as quickly as possible, and to speak with clarity about what the concerns from both sides are. Once we finally got there, it was a productive process.

In terms of issues that lawmakers can help with that are connected to the issue at hand today, we have three recommendations:

- 1) From the union/worker side, we think lawmakers play an important role in a support system for workers when they want to exercise their right to form and join a union. There has been a lot of activity here in the Pittsburgh area in support for workers from this sector, and we know workers all across the Commonwealth would appreciate those levels of support when workers want to have a collective voice. Elected officials having the backs of Pennsylvania workers is so important and is never taken for granted.
- 2) For the benefit of the union and employer, elected officials can also serve as a mediator and connector between workers and employers. You are in the unique spot of advocating for workers' rights and also wanting strong, healthy, vibrant small businesses. Early on in the Coffee Tree/UFCW process, both sides probably lacked a connector to each other that maybe could have alleviated some of the front-end tension. Where possible, lawmakers can help be that mediator to be a voice of reason to begin productive conversations earlier where those relationships exist.
- 3) And for employer benefit, Coffee Tree Roasters is a small business. Not a Starbucks, not a Dunkin Donuts... a small business that wants to be invested and successful in this specific region. Public policies that help our small businesses flourish in the Commonwealth are extremely valuable. Successful small businesses - especially ones that take care of their workers - that become a fabric of a community are vitally important to local economies. State government can play a meaningful role in providing support to businesses like Coffee Tree and other small businesses to be able to thrive in the communities they do business in.

We very much appreciate the committee's time and are happy to take any questions you may have.

Thank you.