

A “militant” approach to Superstore Negotiations?

There can be as many approaches to Union negotiations as there are Unionists. One school of thought is that the most moderate approach is the best one. This philosophy promotes polite professionalism only, and views fighting back and blunt, pointed challenges to managerial authority as counter-productive. Adversarial relations, its proponents assert will only make things worse. If we are “nice” they will be “nice” . . . it is said.

More militant Unionists argue that adherents to this philosophy are naïve. Labour relations will always be adversarial they argue. “A nickel more for them is a nickel less for us” they shout. Managerial talk of “teamwork” really means “behave like good robots and be convinced that you are as important as us even though you aren’t” say the militant. This approach has an emphasis on the use of power.

At UFCW Local 401 it cannot be said that there is a single approach to negotiations. The reality of the circumstance determines the approach. Superstore negotiations are an example.

Superstore is a Loblaw’s banner. Loblaw’s share prices have taken a beating in recent times. But look a little closer – Loblaw is a national Company, and Superstores are doing well in Alberta, says the Company’s negotiator. Even nationally, the Company’s market share has grown. Falling share prices can be an indicator of overall Company problems, but ignore strong regional successes. Superstore has been and continues to be an enormously successful enterprise in Alberta.

Alberta employees deserve to be rewarded in making Superstores so successful! In an environment in which the Company claims to be enduring a shortage of labour, employees have arguably worked harder than ever. Many senior workers have had to step up to the plate and effectively run their departments and train new staff, led at times, by new, untrained or stressed out supervisors. Customers, angry and frustrated with empty shelves, long line ups, and little choice but to struggle with self scanners, have, not surprisingly, barked at workers.

So what has Superstore done to attract and retain staff? They have, with the clearest of intentions, only made things worse.

Through months of negotiations, the Company has pursued concessions. Wages and benefits, they continue to argue, should be clawed back. No valid justification has been offered. Hard working employees have been left with declining economic means in a rich province, where the bills just keep getting bigger. The Company faces charges of unfair labour practices at the Labour Relations Board. Recently, Loblaw’s West has been found guilty of breaching

the fundamental Human Right of Freedom of Association and has been ordered to stop intimidating its employees!

The Company has not pursued the critical way to make a service based business successful – ensure employee satisfaction! So we are faced with the question – does the current reality demand a conciliatory or a militant approach in Union negotiations?

The answer can be, in part, found in recent experience at Safeway negotiations. There, the Union's bargaining committee adopted a deliberately passive approach as bargaining commenced. But a quick and reasonable deal was not to be had. A meaningful offer was only placed before Safeway Union members by the Company, almost a year after expiration of the contract. Why did this offer finally come?

Safeway employees voted, through a Labour Board supervised process, 95% in favour of striking! The conciliatory approach had to turn to a militant approach. Only the threat of a massive walkout brought "profit driven" Safeway to its senses. A deal was concluded without a strike.

As you may know, your Union is awaiting a Labour Board decision that would facilitate strike votes for Superstore employees, commencing in Fort McMurray. After over a year of extending the olive branch and offers of a partnership approach by your Union bargaining committee at Superstore, no one will offer any apologies for the right to be, or appear to be militant.

That is the reality of the situation.

Manitoba Superstore News!

94% of voting Union members at the Superstore/Extra Foods warehouse operation in Winnipeg have just voted to strike over an unfair Company wage offer. The strike vote followed months of negotiations.