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Union targets retailers

UFCW to recruit at national, local chains

Tenisha Mercer / The Detroit News

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With retail working conditions in the national spotlight amid a barrage of protests aimed at Wal-Mart, America's No. 1 retailer, the United Food and Commercial Workers union is stepping up efforts to recruit workers at nonunion stores in Michigan.

UFCW Local 876 in Madison Heights hopes to unionize Metro Detroit workers at nearly a dozen retailers -- including national chains Target, Sears, Kmart, Aldi, Walgreens, Sam's Club and Costco, as well as Nino Salvaggio International Marketplace, headquartered in Troy, and Grand Rapids-based Spartan Stores.

The union's renewed effort comes after a failed organizing attempt at a Home Depot store in Harper Woods two years ago, a protracted battle last year with Farmer Jack over wage and benefit cuts and numerous unsuccessful attempts by national UFCW organizers to win union representation at Wal-Mart.

Despite those setbacks, Local 876 hopes to ride the momentum generated by a highly publicized, national anti-Wal-Mart movement to attract more nonunion retail workers. The ongoing campaign criticizes Bentonville, Ark.-based Wal-Mart for paying less than union retailers and offering fewer benefits.

"Wal-Mart got national attention, but the intent is to try to organize to preserve jobs," said Mark Charrette, organizing director for UFCW Local 876. "We want to bring their living standards up so they don't jeopardize ours. If we can bring their standard of living up, then unionized employers can better compete on a level playing field."

It could be an uphill battle. Farmington Hills retail analyst Kenneth Dalto said the UFCW may be able to organize smaller retailers, such as Nino Salvaggio's, but is skeptical the union's

Advertisement

Michigan is losing a job every 10 minutes

Organizing drive

Who: United Food and Commercial Workers Local 876 in Madison Heights

What: Wants to organize Metro Detroit workers at nonunion retail stores

Targeted retailers: National chains including Target, Sears, Kmart, Aldi, Walgreens, Sam's Club and Costco and Michigan-based Nino Salvaggio International Marketplace and Spartan Stores.

Source: Detroit News research

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campaign will be effective at organizing workers or changing customers' shopping habits when it comes to big discounters like Target, Costco and Wal-Mart, which is building 1,500 stores over the next few years.

"This is 2006, not 1936," Dalto said. "Consumers care about economics. Customers care about prices." UFCW Local 876 represents 23,000 employees in Michigan. Nationwide, the UFCW has 1.4 million members, who work at grocery retailers, food processing and meatpacking companies.

Through its volunteer organizing committee, Local 876 is passing out informational leaflets to employees at targeted nonunion retailers and asking them to provide the UFCW with the names and telephone numbers of co-workers.

The union is planning drives at Home Depot, CVS, Kmart, Sears and Target stores over the next few weeks, Charrette said.

The volunteer committee has hundreds of members who help organizing efforts as far away as Saginaw and Flint. Members also assist in making phone calls on behalf of political campaigns and distribute leaflets.

Companies facing the prospect of a unionized work force balk at union claims that their workers are underpaid, don't receive adequate benefits and face unfair working conditions.

"We pay a competitive wage in our industry," said Mike DeAngelis, a spokesman for CVS Corp., based in Woonsocket, R.I.

"There are multiple avenues for advancement within our store."

Paula Thornton Greer, a spokeswoman for Target Corp., said the retailer does not believe a third party is needed.

"We believe in solving issues and concerns by working together with the help and input of all Target team members," she said. "We want to create a workplace where team members don't want or need a union."

UFCW Local 876 member Lynn Brown, 50, of Clinton Township, says the union is the only way workers can be assured of fair representation.

"If the boss doesn't like your hair or your earrings, you have no recourse," said Brown, a Farmer Jack union employee who is helping with the current recruiting drive.

"With a union, you have rights and the ability to not be harassed if the boss has their favorites. We have to get the work force to understand that it is not about where you go and get the most money. It's about the future."

That's why husband and wife Terry and Pat Farley of Taylor, who also are working on the UFCW's recruiting effort, talked to employees and customers at Wal-Mart stores in Canton, Taylor and Belleville on the day after Thanksgiving as part of the UFCW's campaign to protest employment policies at the giant retailer.

"We are trying to do some good by helping the people who work at Wal-Mart understand what's really going on," said Pat Farley, 58, a union grocery clerk at Kroger.

"It's hard to find a decent paying job. We're hoping that whatever we can accomplish will help younger people out so that when they get older they can have a good job."

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