

Duane Reade, Unions Debate Affiliation Vote

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Ask about unions inside the Duane Reade on 111th Street and you won't hear much. That's because employees have been instructed not to talk with anyone about the two controversial votes they took last May--votes held to determine if the Allied Trade Council, Duane Reade's union for the past 40 years, would affiliate with Retail, Wholesale Department Store Union/United Food and Commercial Workers Local 338, a member of the AFL-CIO.

The first vote, conducted by Duane Reade last spring, defeated the proposed affiliation. The controversy arose after the second vote, conducted over telephone by union representatives, found the vast majority of employees in favor of the proposal.

But even if current employees cannot talk about the votes, former ones can. Patricia Thompson, a Brooklyn resident and mother of four, worked at a downtown Duane Reade until, for reasons she said she does not know, she was fired last December. She said her manager passed around petitions urging employees to vote no to the affiliation. He also told another employee to spread the word that those who didn't vote no would be fired or transferred to another store, she said.

"He can do anything he wants, because I'm going to vote how I want to vote," Thompson said.

The National Labor Relations Board has issued several complaints against Duane Reade. In one, witness allegations strongly echo the harassment described by Thompson. The managers are also accused of bribing employees with extra payment or free lunches and of bullying voters at the polls.

A statement issued yesterday by Duane Reade did not mention the accusations of propaganda, but defended the first vote as accurate and claimed the follow-up vote, conducted via telephone, was invalid.

"On the appointed date, over 2,000 Duane Reade employees voted and overwhelmingly defeated the proposed affiliation vote (by a margin of better than 2:1)," the statement reads. "The unions were displeased with this outcome and subsequently held a secretive 'phone-in' vote (the date and manner of which were never publicly announced), after which they declared the affiliation had been approved."

Local 338 says the first vote was ruined by employee intimidation, while the second vote found 93 percent of voters in favor of the affiliation. But Duane Reade officials have said they believe that only a small fraction of its employees voted by phone and that approximately half of the votes taken over the phone were made by non-employees.

The company statement went on to say that ever since union negotiations broke down in 2001, the ATC has failed to "engage in any meaningful activity on this matter." However, Scott Crowley, who works on special projects for Local 338, blamed the impasse on the company.

"Certainly, the first thing we'd like to do is sit down and have a discussion with them," Crowley said, insisting that Duane Reade has refused to negotiate with the union. "We have a strong, proud history of working well with our employers."

Last December, Local 338 created www.duanegreed.com, a Web site devoted to the various alleged injustices of Duane Reade--from excessively high drug prices to withholding millions of dollars in pension, welfare, and vacation funds.

The Web site claims the campaign has garnered support from thousands of citizens in New York, as

well as local politicians. State Assemblyman Jeff Klein has asked Anthony Cuti, CEO of Duane Reade, to recognize the affiliation of the ATC and Local 338 and to agree on a negotiated contract--something Klein says the 2,600 Duane Reade employees have been lacking for more than two years.

An employee at Duane Reade's headquarters said the company is tallying phone calls from union supporters. She was not allowed to release the total number, but said that "people call every day."

In response to the accusations of withholding funds, Duane Reade returned the blame. "The union has continued to publish lies and half-truths about this situation in an effort to gain control over funds that should be properly used to benefit employees," the representative said.

The National Labor Relations Board is tentatively scheduling a hearing for March 8. Meanwhile, James Rizzo, vice president for human resources at Duane Reade, has failed to return repeated phone calls, and all is quiet on 111th.