

Far From Paradise: Union Pickets Garden of Eden

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While Columbia students struggled to finish their final papers in December, employers at the Garden of Eden gourmet market struggled to contain the paper war going on outside their location at 108th and Broadway.

Workers from Local 1500, a branch of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, have been handing out flyers to passersby in opposition to Garden of Eden's non-union employment, while management is distributing its own flyers to customers at checkout.

"We're not urging the workers there to join our union. We're just educating them about what the [union's] standards are," said John Mallen, an organizer for Local 1500, adding, "We're letting them know about the disproportional benefits." As for the drawbacks to remaining non-union, Mallen cited lower wages, uncertain work hours, and a costly insurance plan.

But some say Local 1500's actions have little to do with informing workers of their rights and more with pushing a union on uninterested employees.

The picketers "were there from day one," said Brian Cassidy, a spokesperson for Garden of Eden, which opened its doors to the Upper West Side on Dec. 15. "Here are a group of people who are out there expressing their wills that have nothing to do with the employees that happen to work in that environment."

Garden of Eden was founded 14 years ago and operates five stores in Manhattan and Brooklyn. It is one of several non-union gourmet markets that have expanded over the past 10 years, Mallen said. Citarella, Gourmet Garage, and Dean & DeLuca are non-union as well.

Some employees refused to discuss their thoughts on unionization, while others were eager to speak up against the workers from Local 1500.

Some Eden employees worry that Local 1500's strategy of speaking to potential shoppers is hurting business, especially because the flyers contain coupons for union supermarket D'Agostino's.

"They shouldn't do that, in my opinion. We get sick days, paid vacation ... what do we need a union for?" asked the supervisor of maintenance at Garden of Eden, who requested not to be identified by name. "Sometimes you get fired and the union still doesn't give you a job," he said.

The supervisor has worked for Garden of Eden for four years, and was previously employed as a construction worker. "That's where you need a union at," he said of his previous job, "This is food."

Another employee, Tony Hall, said he left his job at Jefferson Food Market to join Garden of Eden. "I heard so many good things about them," he said, "This is one of the best companies I've worked for."

However, it is sometimes difficult to gauge how employees really feel about unions. Employers often spend time and money convincing employees not to unionize.

Mallen believed that this had occurred at Garden of Eden's Union Square location, where Local 1500 was unable to get enough support from employees there to form a union. According to Mallen, the failure resulted from Garden of Eden's hiring the Burke Group, a euphemistically titled "management rights consulting firm" union-buster to dissuade its employees from signing the union cards necessary for a vote.

Despite Garden of Eden's stated willingness to cooperate if its employees do elect a union, Mallen is suspicious.

"Based on how [Garden of Eden has] reacted in the past, we don't feel that at this point they would [cooperate]," Mallen said.

In order to hold a vote in a union, 30 percent of Garden of Eden's employees must sign union cards, and a majority have to vote in favor of the union. Management at the store claim that Local 1500 has not been able to show the National Labor Relations board that it has this level of support.

Jordi Reyes-Montblanc, chair of Community Board 9, hopes that the conflict will not affect Garden of Eden's employees.

"People have the right to belong or not belong," he said. "I don't know of one union that has created a job, but I know of several unions that have destroyed jobs."