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## The Stella's Strike: It's About Fairness



Day 30 of the Sherbrook St. location Stella's strike, employees see their first snow fall on the picket line.

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ERROL BLACK CHAIR  
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IN LABOUR ISSUES

**T**he strike at Stella's Restaurant on Sherbrook St. in Winnipeg places the verse of the old labour song, "Which side are you on," before each of us.

The Stella's workers would rather be on the job, but their desire for fairness sees them on the picket line.

In late 2018, three former Stella's employees launched an Instagram campaign called "Not My Stella's." In a matter of days they had 10,000 followers, and 180 complaints from current and past Stella's staff were sent to them, outlining incidents of bullying, sexual assault, harassment and racism. To address these concerns, workers at the Osborne and Sherbrook locations voted to join UFCW late in 2018.

Jeff Traeger, President of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Union, Local 832, which represents Stella's workers, confirmed that relations with Stella's management have been turbulent from day one, with numerous grievances. "This employer is one of the most disrespectful that UFCW 832 has ever dealt with," Traeger says.

The 39 members at the Sherbrook location began bargaining last June, and talks went nowhere quickly. By a unanimous vote, workers armed their negotiating committee with a strike mandate in hopes of kickstarting bargaining. Talks stalled, and on September 21st strike action began.

During a visit to the picket line I found

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a friendly and well-informed group of workers, fully resolved to achieving a fair agreement. Many members of the public were honking to show support and a young couple from the area asked me for directions to the picket captain so they could offer their message of support. A gentleman dropped off Tim Horton’s coffee and donuts and wished the workers well.

I contrast that support with a couple of Winnipeg Free Press letters to the editor that questioned the Stella’s workers, including their decision to join a union and to strike, especially during the COVID pandemic. One letter said, “I don’t think this business deserves to be harassed by labour unions.” The writer added that she “had not noticed oppressive working conditions for staff” concluding with, “It was a mistake to unionize.”

The other letter writer offered the opinion that “Staff should not be dictating to the owners...Canada needs businesses to succeed, not shut down.”

The fact that a customer fails to notice oppressive working conditions does not mean they do not exist. This is obvious.

As for the view that Canada needs successful businesses, who could disagree? But equally, Canada needs workers who earn fair wages and working conditions. If this wasn’t clear before, the pandemic has certainly made it so.

UFCW 832 has clarified publicly that the issues are largely unrelated to wage demands. Workers at Stella’s start at the minimum wage and receive a \$0.60 hike after a year. Manitoba’s minimum wage was increased by \$0.25 on October 1st and the union wants the same \$0.25 increase for those workers on the higher rate, in order to maintain the \$0.60 differential. Hardly exorbitant!

Workers also want eight senior staff to have a 30 hour per week minimum guarantee,

as well as a resolution to scheduling issues. Lastly, the union seeks to resolve a workplace issue whereby staff are told when to take breaks and end up losing tips from tables they have served.

The workers aren’t trying to dictate anything to management. On the contrary, they want to negotiate their working conditions and pay rates.

Stella’s workers, and the many like them who are in service sector jobs that lack full-time hours and reasonable pay and benefits, are among the growing numbers of the working poor. It is the business models dependent on such poverty level jobs that need to be questioned. Such business models are an important part of the rapidly rising inequality that concerns so many Canadians. As BC’s living wage campaign says, “work should lift you out of poverty, not keep you there.”

Supporting workers’ rights to organize and to engage in free collective bargaining is an essential part of the path to reducing inequality.

The Pallister government disagrees. They have recently introduced legislation to make it easier for unions to be decertified, and easier for employers to fire workers for strike-related activities. Also, a provision of the Labour Relations Act that allows workers access to arbitration after 60 days of strike or lockout is to be removed.

Obviously, Pallister wants fewer rights for all workers, even though workers’ rights are human rights.

This stands in stark contrast to the words of Nelson Mandela, who once said that each of us “should place human solidarity, the concern for the other, at the centre of the values” by which we live.

I believe in this sentiment. That’s why I’m on the side of Stella’s workers. Which side are you on?

*Paul Moist is a retired labour leader and is a CCPA-MB Research Associate.*