

Teamsters, Consumers And Community Protest UNFI Shareholders Meeting

Protesters Condemn Unsustainable Practices as UNFI Swallows Sacramento-Based Tony's Fine Foods



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SACRAMENTO, Calif., Dec. 17, 2014 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- On Wednesday, Teamsters, organic food consumers, supply chain workers and community leaders protested the unsustainable practices of United Natural Foods, Inc. (NYSE: UNFI) and its retail partner Whole Foods Market at UNFI's annual shareholders meeting. The protesters informed UNFI shareholders and put management on notice that continued worker abuse and intimidation will not be tolerated.



UNFI workers from Moreno Valley, Calif. who organized a union, along with educators from Hudson Valley, New York, participated in the UNFI shareholder meeting as labor, civic and environmental supporters rallied outside. UNFI is a \$6 billion Fortune 500 company. It is America's largest organic and natural foods distributor and Whole Foods Market's primary strategic distribution partner. Over the last 10 years, UNFI's revenues have grown by nearly 300 percent.

UNFI and Whole Foods profess commitment to socially and environmentally responsible practices. Both companies have greatly benefited from consumers' shift towards food and groceries that are perceived to be ethically sourced in a sustainable manner.

But in Moreno Valley, UNFI broke federal laws that protect workers' rights when it intimidated, threatened and fired workers. UNFI warehouse worker Sergio Acosta was fired for trying to join a union with his fellow coworkers.

"It's time for UNFI to recognize that our lives and those of our families matter," Acosta said. "UNFI must respect our rights to form our union instead of using threats, running us out, and pushing us into poverty."

In November 2014, the Teamsters Union was federally certified as the union for the truck drivers at UNFI's Moreno Valley warehouse after UNFI had managed to delay the counting of the ballots for over a year on a technicality. Yet, UNFI still refuses to recognize the union.

"It's time for UNFI to stop the intimidation," said Steve Vairma, Teamsters Warehouse Division Director. "Over the years UNFI has tried to undermine workers who joined the Teamsters, even where the Teamsters have been certified as the workers' union through federally supervised elections. UNFI runs roughshod over its employees' fundamental freedom of association and their protected concerted activity and bargaining rights."

"It seems that whether 35 percent or 65 percent of a group of workers at a UNFI warehouse or truck yard joins together as a union, UNFI management shows them zero respect - and treats them all with the same level of contempt and denial and heavy-handed tactics," Randy Korgan, Organizing Director for Teamsters Local Union 63 in Covina, Calif., said.

Across America, UNFI has taken massive tax subsidies while local school systems struggle. UNFI builds new warehouses with little concern for the environment and with a lot of out-of-state labor. UNFI recently built a warehouse in this manner in Hudson Valley, New York.

According to Tim Brown, President of the Valley Central Teachers Association in Hudson Valley, today's kindergarteners will graduate high school before UNFI pays its full share of taxes to his school district. Educational programs have been cut; town and school taxes have gone up; and most of the community can't afford to shop at UNFI's biggest retail partner – Whole Foods. Yet, UNFI expects these same families to supplement UNFI's tax breaks.

"I'm telling UNFI - it's been more than a year and it's past time for you to pay your school taxes in full," Brown said.

"It's the right thing to do if you want to truly be a good neighbor."

"From Gilroy, California to the Hudson Valley, New York – UNFI is building another reputation: that of bringing in out-of-state contractors and refusing to fully put local skilled labor to work when it builds new warehouses. UNFI says it is community-oriented, but which community are they talking about, exactly?" said Derecka Mehrens of the Partnership for Working Families.

"UNFI's massive distribution center in Gilroy will be completed in 2015, and it already operates a 500,000 square foot distribution center in Rocklin. Now that UNFI owns Tony's Fine Foods, what will the company do with Tony's warehouses and distribution network in our region?" said Jim Tobin, Secretary-Treasurer of Teamsters Local Union 150 in Sacramento.

Organic consumers also worry that UNFI, with its acquisition of Tony's, is veering away from a professed commitment to organic food – possibly straying toward factory farming and undermining the further growth of sustainable farming and food consumption.

"We've criticized UNFI for its warehouse siting decisions, which negatively impact farmland and waterways even as they harm communities' living standards. But this shift in business strategy has us very worried," said Alexis Baden-Mayer, Political Director of the Organic Consumers Association, "The organic food movement needs corporate champions, not villains. UNFI seems to be going in the wrong direction as fast as it can."

Founded in 1903, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters represents 1.4 million hardworking men and women throughout the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. Visit www.teamster.org for more information. Follow us on Twitter @Teamsters and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/teamsters.

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