

Michigan: Borders workers strike in Ann Arbor

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Workers at the Borders Bookstore in Ann Arbor, Mich., went on strike Saturday, November 8, to protest the company's unfair labor practices. Also at issue are low wages and poor health benefits for employees. The Ann Arbor bookstore is the original Borders, which has grown into one of the largest bookstore chains in the country with more than 400 shops.

In December 2002, the Ann Arbor workers voted 51 to 4 in favor of forming a union, which has been organized within the AFL-CIO-affiliated United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). Negotiations over the past 11 months between the union and management have failed to yield a contract. In early October, union members voted to reject a minimal offer by management, and later in the month authorized the union to strike.

The Ann Arbor store is the latest Borders branch to unionize. A number of attempts to unionize—generally in association with the UFCW—have failed to yield results. Those unions that have formed have been unable to negotiate long-term contracts or secure meaningful increases in wages and benefits, and have subsequently dissolved. Borders management has consistently refused to grant concessions on economic issues and has worked to block attempts at employee organization. The only other Borders currently unionized is the store in Minneapolis.

The WSWWS spoke to several of the Ann Arbor workers about the issues and background of the strike.

Hal is the training supervisor and has worked 18 years at the Ann Arbor Borders. He said that at the top of the list of grievances is a policy of harassment and intimidation by management. "It is unbelievable to me what they have done since we began organizing," he said. "For example, management took pictures of employees rallying outside of the store, even though we were not threatening in the least. They have been talking to employees about their union activities and in general attempting to intimidate workers supportive of the union."

Hal also spoke about the economic issues involved. According to Borders management, the average wage for workers at the store is about \$8.25 an hour. The starting salary is even less, \$6.50 to \$7.00 an hour for full-time workers. Workers do not receive benefits for six months after beginning work.

"We should be able to make a living wage," Hal said. "Even what we are asking for is less than a living wage, but we are hoping that it will be a first step in the right direction. We are asking them to hold health care costs to what they are," but management has refused to move on these issues. According to an ordinance passed by the Ann Arbor city council, all government workers must receive a so-called "living wage" of \$8.70 an hour for workers with benefits, but this does not apply to workers in the private sector.

"Over the past decade they have been cutting manpower and reducing inventory. It's the way corporate America works. Millions of dollars in profits have gone in recent years to buy back shares of the company's stock in order to keep the stock price high. Who does this benefit? Not the Borders worker certainly, but the executives."

Indeed, Greg Josefowicz, the chairman and CEO of the company, has nearly \$6 million in company stock

options, according to figures on bordersunion.org, a web site run by Borders workers. In 2001, he earned more than \$1 million in salary and bonuses. All of the top executives have over \$1 million in unused stock options.

Adonia and Allison have both worked for five years at Borders. They complained of declining benefits, shrinking pay increases and the aggressive anti-union campaign by management. "I am making less this year than last, if you take into account the rising health care costs," said Adonia. The company recently cut its contribution to health care for workers by 10 percent. "Borders is an international corporation and should be able to afford to pay its workers a decent wage. I know people at mom and pop stores nearby who make \$3 more an hour than Borders employees."

Allison noted that Borders has attempted to present itself as a progressive corporation, especially at its Ann Arbor branch. "The strike and what Borders has done really demonstrates that it is just a greedy corporation, not the progressive store that it pretends to be."

Dave is another long-time worker. He said that management had provoked the strike by refusing to negotiate seriously on the main issues. "They are not offering to improve conditions at all," he said, "but are instead offering to eliminate things. They want to give us less than we already have. Borders wants to bust the union. They are opposed to labor rights and the rights of workers to organize and form a union."

"The company has been doing everything it can to prevent a fair contract. They are harassing and intimidating union members. They fired one long-term employee and have been creating a hostile work environment. They have been searching employee bags more often and recently put in security guards to supposedly protect against union members and sympathizers."

"The company has brought in workers from other stores and from management positions to fill the gap of the strikers. They recently held a job fair where the company interviewed 100 people, presumably to replace the strikers."



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