

June 24, 2002
Mr. Ivan Limright
Secretary Treasurer
UFCW 1518

Dear Ivan,

We have trusted in the advice and direction of the union executive. Although it looked odd, and there were more questions than answers, we gave you a strong strike vote for the MOU. As it turns out there were a number of holes in the document and it is safe to say a truck has been driven through them. I can think of nothing positive that came from this exercise but that is water under the bridge. We have been more than patient. Many feel too patient.

I would like to remind you of your statement at the Harrison conference: "One of the most gratifying things I get to see on a regular basis is our union going to the wall and defending the rights and dignity of our members."

And Brooke Sundin: "The company is just dismissing them like they don't matter, and we're all busting our butts fighting to save their jobs and right this wrong that the company is trying to jam down their throats."

With only a few months left, now would probably be a good time to put some meat on those statements. I have the following for your comments and consideration.

This dispute should be seen as the opening skirmish of retail negotiations. It is a chance for UFCW to set the stage for next year, to flex some muscle and show that unions still matter. That once a line of fairness and equity has been crossed the stand will be aggressive and strong. Our success here will have a strong reflection on what power UFCW brings to the table next year. This is not just about 250 jobs. Do you agree?

If you agree it strikes me that there are some fundamentals that we need to get back to. The power of unionism has always been people based. Now it is more like a top down governance. We are expected to remain united, "in solidarity", while all the real decision-making power lies elsewhere, our ability to influence it minimized. And the clock keeps ticking. One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of decision making power our warehouse committee has. This battle cannot be fought by generals behind a desk with a time table strategy. The battle itself will dictate what is required and where. To be effective we need to be able to make decisions. Success will not come from any one great idea. It will be pursuing every avenue and tying them together. Instead we feel hamstrung.

As it always is these days, success in battle hinges on two factors. Money and organization. If you're not big enough you don't win. That's a big part of why we join a union. It takes big to fight big. Now is the time for some real financial commitment and cooperation. Paid ads like the Langley Times ad should be ongoing in community weeklies. As reported on CKNW, the HEU spent half a million dollars on paid ads for one issue, the privatization of cleaning services.

Radio ads clearly have value in the eyes of many unions as we hear them all the time. Where are our radio spots?

The heart of unionism lies in the more distant towns. Why are we not regularly there? It is not enough to have members who are on holidays pop in when they can. We need an orderly and ongoing schedule coordinated with newspaper ads in each town. Our warehouse stewards need a significant cash float in order to have any hope of effectively driving this part of the battle. They need to be able to freely schedule trips and write checks for costs incurred with receipts. I have heard the suggestion that we focus on the more “profitable” stores as if it should be one or the other. It should be both. We will generate great support both for our cause and for hopes of a strong round of negotiations next year. I suggest a \$1,000. float. Is this unreasonable?

Have 3 leaflets current on any given day and rotate through different areas. This keeps people updated and interested. There is no shortage of factual statements we can make and customer education is likely to benefit from a change in the material. We have many computer graphics and page design people here at the warehouse and could easily generate leaflets ourselves. All that is required is for our warehouse stewards to be able to clear the leaflets directly with the legal department.

“To say we are shocked by the LRB ruling is an understatement,” I take it that UFCW feels strongly about this. Will you organize a rally outside the LRB as a result? Will there be a rally outside JP’s office?

A weekly update needs to be created for distribution both on the web site and faxed to each and every union in this province. This will keep the momentum and the issue alive and interesting. It should be written by our warehouse stewards who are close to the action. We can provide digital images to go along. Listening to the people who are actually have their jobs on the line has real power. Workers talking to workers. Hey, what a concept. That could get big!! Is this unreasonable?

What’s happened here to the guys at the warehouse is something no one can be proud of. It is about corporate manipulations and to what purpose they should be used. It is a direct affront to everything a union should hold dear. It comes at the right time as the thoughts of British Columbians turn more and more to the very issues of equity in the corporate world. Right story, right time. This dispute will be a signpost for the state of unionism today and more specifically for the part UFCW has played in creating that state. It is more than just 250 jobs. We have lots of willing bodies and creative talent, lots of good ideas. These are just a few. They need money, resources, and cooperation well beyond what we have seen. If you agree as to the importance of this dispute, then loosen the reins and open the purse strings accordingly. It’s time to take the gloves off. Now or never.

I look forward, as do many of my brothers, to reading your comments regarding the above.

In Solidarity

Darryl Gehlen