

LABOR

A First Contract Is Finally in Sight for Unionized Starbucks Workers

After a grueling campaign, Starbucks Workers United and the company announced a major breakthrough this week that's being hailed as "a very, very big deal."

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Protestors rally against what they perceive to be union busting tactics, outside a Starbucks in Great Neck, New York, demanding the reinstatement of a former employee.

(PHOTO BY THOMAS A. FERRARA/NEWSDAY RM VIA GETTY IMAGES)

G

one are the days when former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz could argue that the company's upstart barista network would be no more than a blip in the coffee behemoth's history.

On Tuesday, Starbucks Workers United (SBWU)'s parent union and Starbucks announced that they had reached a "foundational framework" for substantive negotiations over a range of issues.

"The fight is worth fighting for. This victory alone proves that no workplace is out of reach for organizing," fired former Starbucks barista Alicia Flores of Portland, Oregon told *In These Times*, speaking in a personal capacity.

The two sides hope the agreement will form the basis for contract talks at nearly 400 union shops, the resolution of ongoing litigation, and an agreement over rules governing future organizing at Starbucks locations. While the publicly announced details of the agreement include few specifics and even fewer guarantees, the barista network has won at least the potential for negotiations over a first master contract.

"This agreement...is a very, very big deal," said Dave Kamper, Senior Strategist at the progressive think tank Economic Policy Institute. "Starbucks Workers United has shown that determined workers, willing to use all the tools of worker power at their disposal...*can* bring companies to the bargaining table."

Starbucks also announced that, as a measure of good faith, it will provide credit card tipping and other benefits to union stores that it has provided to nonunion stores since May 2022.

Some SBWU members were reluctant to speak to *In These Times* about the framework. But those who did open up were enthusiastic.

"I'm excited for the gang at SBWU to bargain a fair contract and to hopefully get reinstated as a fired worker," said Flores.

Similarly, barista James Greene of the Pittsburgh area, also speaking in a personal capacity, said that he is "encouraged by the company's [message]" and hopes "we can negotiate in good faith soon."

A long way

The SBWU campaign has come a long way since its first win in Buffalo, New York in December 2021 which established the first Starbucks-owned union shop in the United States in decades. That victory

kicked off a massive grassroots-led expansion of the campaign: by the end of February 2022, about 100 new Starbucks had filed to unionize.

However, by springtime, Starbucks put in place a series of measures to block the union drive. For example, in May 2022, it offered enhanced benefits like credit card tipping, but only to nonunion stores. Over time, the company also engaged in a variety of forms of union-busting, including firing workers, cutting hours, and, in some instances, using police as strikebreakers. Starbucks did not return a request for comment on these issues.

The steps the company took resulted in a slowdown of the SBWU campaign and what had been a flood of union filings slowed to a trickle. The campaign became a war of attrition, with the union slowly filing at more stores, petitioning legal complaints at the NLRB, and holding occasional coordinated strikes. Meanwhile, the company attempted to beat back SBWU through a variety of tactics, including firings that have been deemed retaliatory and illegal. It also vigorously contested the NLRB's decisions and simply delayed, delayed, delayed.

Labor rights and Gaza

More recently, Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza helped widen the rift between the company and the barista network. Members of SBWU came out strongly in favor of Palestinian rights and against the bombardment, including one post on X (formerly Twitter) from the official SBWU account that has since been deleted.

The company sued Workers United, the parent union, arguing that SBWU's logo was too close to that of Starbucks and that customers might believe Starbucks itself stood against Israel's assault. The union quickly counter-sued Starbucks for defamation.

As Workers United President Lynne Fox wrote at *In These Times*, “Starbucks is seeking to exploit the ongoing tragedy in Gaza and Israel to bolster an anti-union campaign that has already resulted in more than 270 violations of the National Labor Relations Act by falsely attacking the union's reputation with workers and the public.”

The aggressive move by Starbucks backfired, generating a grassroots consumer boycott against the company, including a campus movement to kick the coffee chain out of colleges and universities. This, in turn, contributed to a steadily declining market cap from November 2023 on, with a 1.6% loss in the company's value on December 7, 2023 alone.

“Having witnessed [corporate's] patterns over the years, this can only mean that, to customers and investors, it's becoming ugly not to bargain,” said Liv Ryan, a barista in Lynbrook, New York.

By December 2023, the company and the union’s game of chicken began to near its end as Starbucks signaled a willingness to negotiate with SBWU over contracts in union stores—something it was legally required to do in the first place. However, some veteran labor observers like Steven Greenhouse were skeptical of the company’s true intentions at the time.

But during mediation over the litigation over brand use, the two sides say, there emerged enough to work with to establish this “foundational framework” for further negotiations.

What lies ahead

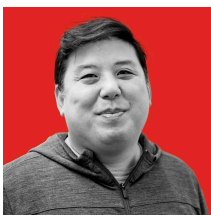
Beyond winning a first contract for many of the union shops, the most significant short-term impact may ultimately be a potential neutrality agreement that would allow the union to organize in peace. This could allow the union to expand its presence in Starbucks shops without the virulent pushback from the company. But for now, few specifics have been made public.

“Starbucks appears to be shifting course a little bit... It’s a big deal but a lot remains to be seen; what [process will govern future] organizing? Have they dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s?” asked Peter Olney, a longtime labor observer. Olney noted that Workers United represents only about 400 of the over 9,000 company-owned Starbucks stores in the United States.

Still, the ramifications of the framework could serve as a model for other efforts to unionize large corporations, especially those in the service sector.

“Unions, big unions at that, need to take the chance and organize all major corporations of the fast food industry to unite for real worker power,” said Flores.

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