Amazon Facing Down Whole Foods Unionization Efforts

Whole Foods workers are trying to unionize. Previous attempts at unionization have been made by workers at the grocery chain, but these efforts were made before Amazon acquired the company earlier in 2018. The email introducing the unionizing efforts at the store came from a group of workers backed by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), a New York-based division of the United Food and Commercial Workers union that also represents workers at other grocery store chains.

The sale of Whole Food Market (WFM) to Amazon also came with a promise from the e-commerce giant to trim labor costs, placing an unknown number of jobs at stake. Workers at WFM see a union as their best option to protect their positions and negotiate for worker benefits.

> *Many in leadership are well aware of the fact that when John Mackey sold WFM to Jeff Bezos last year, that deal came with an agreement to trim hundreds of millions of dollars of labor from our stores. There will continue to be layoffs in 2019 and beyond as Amazon aims to aggressively trim our labor force before it expands with new technology and labor models…"*

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What Do They Want

The demands outlined in the email to Whole Foods employees sound an awful lot like the platform of a progressive politician. These items include a $15 minimum wage, 401k matching, paid maternity leave, and lower health insurance

deductibles. The email also mentions a previously available profit-sharing program for all employees, full or part-time, that reach 6,000 hours. Under Amazon leadership, that program is no longer available for all, and this unionizing effort is calling for its reinstatement.

Amazon and Workers

Amazon is not an unknown quantity. The tech company is notorious for their treatment of fulfillment center workers, with horror stories revolving around timed or non-existent bathroom breaks, unrealistic target numbers, and constant surveillance popping up on the internet regularly. Conditions are obviously different at Amazon headquarters and similar locations, but it's likely that Amazon considers those who work at Whole Foods closer to a fulfillment center employee.

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The company is also pushing for automation in its fulfillment centers and warehouses. Look no further than the Amazon Go store, a cashier-less grocery store that automatically bills your Amazon account for your purchases. Launched in January 2018, the concept allows the Seattle-based retail giant to drastically reduce the number of staff (and therefore costs) involved in running a physical store. There are a total of four stores open in the U.S. (three in Seattle and one in Chicago). Amazon is considering expanding that concept rapidly, with 50 more shops planned for other major metropolitan areas by 2019.

Automation

Amazon currently has over 100,000 robot "employees." The company has not hidden their devotion to efficiency, and automation has made many aspects of the business smoother and

more profitable, like ordering inventory and checking out customers.

That will likely make unionization attempts more difficult for Whole Foods. Amazon is in the process of eliminating traditional grocery store jobs. Where is the bargaining chip for employees of the grocery chain? Then again, they're asking for a sustainable standard of living from their employer. If one of the world's largest companies is unable to provide that for their employees, what hope do the rest of us have?

Sources:

- *Whole Foods workers are moving to unionize. Read the letter sent to employees nationwide* – New Food Economy
- *Peeing in trash cans, constant surveillance, and asthma attacks on the job: Amazon workers tell us their warehouse horror stories* – Business Insider
- *Amazon's First Cashierless Store Looks an Awful Lot Like Whole Foods Without Employees* – Grub Street
- *Amazon is considering opening as many as 3,000 cashierless stores by 2021, report says* – CNBC