

Interview with a Jimmy John's Worker



A 2011 interview with an organizer at Jimmy John's in Minneapolis.

This interview took place last fall, shortly after the NLRB election at Jimmy John's. We'd asked a couple Jimmy John's union members about doing an interview, to which union member Davis Ritsema very kindly went out of his way to do one. Unfortunately a variety of factors held up publication of it, but it remains as interesting and relevant as it was just after the election, particularly as recent goings on have proven, as union members insisted at the time, that the election was not the end of the story and the Jimmy John's Workers' Union (JJWU) was "Here to Stay." Since several union members were fired recently, the fight with management has been raised to a new intense notch and more news will likely be coming in in short order. We hope to get a chance to do interview more workers at some time in the near future.

Q.: So, maybe you could start by telling me a bit about how you got involved in the union?

A.: So, I was hired at Uptown¹ in July of '09, and got a job as a salt basically for the purposes of organizing. I was in UNITE-HERE previously and wanted to explore other options as far as organizing, so I talked to David Boehnke [another worker at Jimmy John's, also fired last week], went to some committee meetings, and got hired about a month after that.

Q.: Now, what stage was the campaign at, at this point?

A.: We had a committee of 6 or 7 people for all the stores in the franchise, and had collected 30-something signatures for the petition. So we were definitely a solid body at that point; I

mean, we definitely became progressively stronger from then on, and never really moved backwards in our numbers.

Q.: What kind of actions were going on around that time?

A.: Before we went public, alongside collecting signatures, we were having shopfloor actions at each store that were about small gains. For example, against abusive managers, some sexual harassment issues. There was an incident at the shop where I working, where one of the workers was punched by the manager, and everyone walked out and refused to work until that manager was fired. There were also some drivers who were getting screwed over so bad about their hours that they got together and wrote their own schedule. That also happened at my store — there it was both in-shop employees and drivers, but it was less successful there. Basically the manager took some parts of the schedule we wrote and wrote his own schedule that was a lot worse for us than the one we'd come up with.

Q.: So, from what you're saying, it sounds like management was able to kind of recuperate that into something that worked more for their benefit.

A.: Yeah. Basically the question was over staffing, because for drivers over-staffing was a big deal, because we weren't making enough tips.

Q.: Now, at this point, how many people at Jimmy John's knew about the union?

A.: I'd say about 50% had heard about something about it, about 15% had signed cards and maybe 10% really knew what was going on.

Q.: What made you all decide on the timing as far as when to go public?

A.: Well, sometime around February we were pretty strong. We had somewhere between 30-40% who had signed and we had a committee of 10-12 people, but we weren't really ready yet. It was probably hovering around more like 30% because there was a lot of turnover at that point. So we waited and gave ourselves a goal that when we reached around 35% we'd give a pretty strong push to get to 50%, and kind of worked off that. Unfortunately that took the better part of the summer. We pushed to go public on Sept. 2nd because of a few factors. One was Labor Day – we found it both appropriate and strategic to go public with our union efforts during Labor Day weekend due to its historical significance. We also wanted to plan two simultaneous actions on Labor Day, Monday, Sept 6th. One was a large rally that would be held on the University campus featuring music, literature and talks from Jimmy John's workers. The other was a demonstration on a national level; with the help of the IWW, Jimmy John's stores in 32 states were picketed by our fellow workers, handing out fliers to customers and employees outlining our struggle here in Minneapolis. One other factor was that school was starting, and with the stores on campus we wanted to do a lot of outreach to those students.

Q.: Tell me a little about the character of the union and the workforce in general, in terms of culture, what kind of people work there and the people that make up the union.

A.: That's a good question. One interesting thing about that is one of the reasons why Jimmy John's was chosen to organize, that reason being that within the counter-cultural scene in Minneapolis, a lot of people were already employed at Jimmy John's and knew each other – bikers, musicians, activists. So that definitely helped out in the long run, but also hurt us too I think because the employee demographic wasn't strictly counter-culture, so it was easy to get trapped in the groove of having easy conversations with people more closely related to me culturally, and forgetting about other sections of workers. But I think we managed to push past that as best as we could.

Segregation within the workplace is a reality we still face in the U.S. today and does not always relate strictly to either nationality or gender, which while clearly being the most common, are in my opinion the only two types of segregation most people usually think about. However, workplace segregation can often times also be seen in terms of age or sexual orientation. Beyond this there is even physical appearance; concepts of beauty or ideas of what it means to be attractive are unfortunately governed by “social constructs” which are in general fabrications that are developed by the ruling class as an effort to establish social norms and influence consumers. In these terms we can see that within industries such as entertainment, glamor, fashion, film, and of course restaurants and the service industry, social concepts naturally impose segregating conditions; for a young women applying for serving position at a restaurant, her chances of getting the job or not is for the most part completely out of her hands and instead will most likely be based solely on the owner’s objective judgment of her physical appearance. Within any given workplace, segregation between workers most commonly materializes through what is referred to as “divisions of labor.” For example, at Jimmy John’s a natural division of labor exists between delivery drivers and in-shoppers. Within this division, each one of the two positions have their own specific set of different responsibilities which, in general, are not interchangeable or which, at the least, they do not commonly share with one another; in-shoppers are responsible for running the line and making sandwiches while the responsibility of the delivery driver is, of course, to deliver the sandwiches and to deliver them as fast as humanly possible. Now for reasons that are perhaps most likely cultural in nature, at this Jimmy John’s franchise here in Minneapolis we see that throughout all the stores, the entire section of delivery drivers is almost completely dominated by white men. Whether this division was due to the intentional efforts of ownership or simply attributed to natural cultural differences it existed nonetheless and thus created a real barrier which we had to get past.

Q.: So as a kind of follow-up question from that, I know the company resorted to a lot of red baiting in their anti-union drive, even accusing the IWW of wanting to “destroy America.” How exactly did that go over with the most of the workers?

A.: I think David Boehnke’s perspective is right that it’s not so much that people are scared of things like socialism, communism, anarchism, but more that you have a group workers that is trying to improve conditions, but these workers who were targeted by the company were uneasy about being misled by the organization in terms of having multiple agendas, or wondering “what does the IWW really want?”

Q.: So I guess a fair question would be, what does the IWW really want?

A.: Obviously you can read our Constitution online; but at Jimmy John’s what we want is basic fairness and working conditions improved across the fast food industry, and the only reason our efforts are seen as being in direct conflict with the “American way of life” is because millions of union jobs have been exported to third-world countries or contracted out to non-unionized companies, which is a step backwards and needs to change.

Q.: In the Jimmy John’s union drive and other campaigns, companies have also tried to claim that the IWW is not a real union. Since you’re talking now about unions, I guess a question would be what your relationship has been in this campaign with other unions?

A.: Companies and even other unions have always tried to de-certify the IWW as a union. We focus on organizing all branches of industry, unlike other unions. But in terms of this campaign, we seen a lot of support from union locals in the AFL-CIO.

Q.: So thinking about the campaign up to now, how do you feel moving forward from the election?

A.: Since the election I feel like we have gained support. Workers who used to be against the union became more sympathetic after finding out how close the vote was. I think that a lot of workers didn't think we were serious about what we were trying to do here. Just by getting that close after everything the company did to ensure we didn't win, it shook a lot of people up, and in different ways. My pro-union co-workers quickly turned their feelings of guilt and let down into anger and then from anger into action. Several anti-union workers at one store told us that they thought we should hold another election because of everything management did that was illegal and unfair. I think that now we still have a lot of support in all the stores and it will be easy to start winning individual demands. The election was one question: union? yes or no. And that is a big and often times unclear question for workers in our industry today. But now, we can start to organize actions around specific demands and we feel confident that we will start to win improvements. Workers that are against the union for whatever reason are not going to be against raises or paid sick days. As united workers we feel stronger than ever and are ready to push forward with strength and confidence that we will win our demands, improve our conditions at Jimmy John's here in Minneapolis and inspire food service workers all over the U.S. to stand up and resist, join our fight and create a movement to organize the fast food industry!

Q.: Now we should probably wrap up here, but is there anything else you want to add about the IWW, the Jimmy John's campaign or fast food organizing?

A.: I guess I'd just say in terms of the fast food industry and the service industry in general, and all industry really, companies will do everything in their power to prevent workers from bettering their lives. They spend thousands, if not millions, to ensure their profit margins are not tampered with, yet they don't know what it feels like to be hungry or cold or impoverished, so the cry of the workers will remain the same until we can lift ourselves up: the working class and the employing class have nothing in common.

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- [1.](#) Contributor's note: a store in the Minneapolis neighborhood called Uptown.