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Drivers say company retaliated

Pair claim their efforts to organize a union led to dismissal from jobs

BY TOYNETT HALL Staff Writer

Theresa Gares, 39, of Toms River, and Arnold Petillo, 76, of Brick Township, wanted to improve working conditions for their co-workers at the Durham Bus Company in Lakewood.

After company officials received notification of their efforts to organize a union, Gares and Petillo were fired from their jobs on Jan. 22. They said they were not told why they were fired.

Gares and Petillo were at-will employees who did not have a contract with the company. They and other employees sought assistance in union representation with the Transport Workers Union (TWU) of America, AFL-CIO.

Gares and Petillo were part of a group of in-house organizers who sought to provide their co-workers with a voice in the workplace. The pair claim they were targeted for trying to form a union.

Tiffini Bloniarz, director of corporate communications for Durham School Services, said, "We respect an individual's decision whether or not to be represented by a union."



Seeking union representation "does not play a role in the hiring and termination process, and had no bearing on the two employees and why they were let go from the company," Bloniarz said.

Linda Dill and Steve Roberts, both international organizers with the TWU, have joined Gares and Petillo in their fight.

On Jan. 23, one day after the two employees were fired by the bus company, the TWU filed two unfair labor practice complaints with the National Labor Relations Board in Philadelphia at Region 4.

The TWU submitted the Certification of Representation on Jan. 28. An election on the question of forming a union will be determined in two weeks with a date for the vote.

Roberts said the question of whether to form a union at the bus company will be decided by a majority vote.

"If 10 people show up and six people vote in favor of a union, you would get it," he said.

Co-workers and union organizers rallied around Gares and Petillo during an educational session held on Jan. 27 at the American Legion hall on River Avenue. Charlie Wowkanech, president of the New Jersey AFL-CIO, gave the keynote address.

"If you want dignity, respect, retirement and a decent contract, you're not going to get it from this company," he said.

Wowkanech asked why, if teachers, policemen and firemen can have a contract, school bus drivers cannot have one, too.

"The TWU has negotiated many contracts for school bus drivers and aides all around the United States, and in each case, after the TWU won the election, they negotiated contracts improving the wages, benefits and working conditions the school bus district," according to information provided by the TWU.

The TWU maintains that the same thing can happen for Durham school bus drivers and said the union would pay for all of the costs associated with negotiations.









"Once you have a union, at least you will have a spokesperson to negotiate on your behalf," Wowkanech told the employees.

Wowkanech said he is a second-generation union member, following in the footsteps of his late father. He said that without his union he would never have been able to support his family. He encouraged all who were at the Jan. 27 rally to "stay together, stay the course."

The union's motto is "United we stand, divided we beg."

Dill also encouraged the employees to stick together regardless of the obstacles.

"Theresa and Arnold did not deserve to lose their jobs. They cared enough for everyone on that property to seek a union. Don't forget about them. Stay upbeat and support your in-house committee members. You will be scared, but you have to work through it," she said.

Roberts claimed the company will attempt to mislead the employees as to how a union operates.

"They will try all types of union-busting tricks and do anything to buy your vote," he charged.

He said the firm may try to provide employees with incorrect information about union dues.

According to information provided by the TWU, "Dues do not begin until a contract is negotiated and ratified by the members. The due rates will be \$21 per month and members only pay when they work. There are no initiation fees. Seventy percent of their dues stay at the local union and 30 percent goes to the TWU International."

Felice Nelson of Toms River said her husband was a technical steel worker who belonged to TWU Local 373.

"There is nothing like a union. Without it we wouldn't have benefits, a pension, an annuity. We have so much because we were part of a union," she said.

She encouraged her colleagues to "stand up for your rights."

"We are working to live, not living to work," she said, adding, "If you're with a union, stick with it, for your family and for yourself. The ones who are against unions just don't know."

TWU International Vice President Susan Resch said a union "is like a family."

"All local unions are autonomous. You have a part ownership in the union. You don't pay dues until you have a contract. Joining a union would be one of the most important decisions you make in your life," Resch said, adding that a union allows employees to have "dignity and justice in the workplace."