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FAST FACTS

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Ask Target for Fairness Retail jobs worth fighting for

In 2011, American retail giant Target bought 189 Zellers stores across Canada. Soon after the purchase, the corporation sold 39 stores to Walmart and another handful to other retailers such as Sobeys. Target has consistently referred to these dealings as “real estate transactions” and asserted that they are under no obligation to the people who work at Zellers. The company says that it chose to enter the Canadian market through existing retail stores, rather than building new locations, because it was concerned about meeting the requirements of our municipal regulations.

As a result of these “real estate transactions”, more than 10,000 Zellers workers could lose their jobs by the end of 2012. Target has announced that more than 100 Zellers stores which they purchased will close this summer and all the employees will be terminated. In fact, many workers have already received termination notices from Zellers. These same stores will re-open under the Target banner in 2013. In Manitoba, the company has bought the Grant Park, Polo Park, Kildonan Place and Southdale Mall shopping centre stores in Winnipeg, and the 18th Street store in Brandon.

According to Target, terminated employees are free to apply to work in their stores once the conversion is complete, but their wage rates, benefits and years of service will not be recognized. Zellers workers will be competing with

new applicants for the opportunity to simply return to work in their store.

Zellers’ worker turnover rate is relatively low compared to other chains. In any given store, one can find employees who have worked at Zellers for 20, 30 and even 40 years. The shared experience of most Zellers workers, no matter what their demographic, is that they depend on their jobs for their livelihoods. The people who work at Zellers remind us that retail work is an important career for many.

This is why many people are shocked to learn that Target’s entry into Canada appears to be contingent on wide scale job loss. Many Zellers employees know their customers on a first name basis and often consider them friends. They are people who live in the neighbourhoods which surround their store – neighbourhoods which could be damaged by so many job losses.

Target has refused to answer calls for recognition of the seniority, wages and benefits of Zellers workers. If a Zellers worker does get hired by Target in 2013, they can expect to start at minimum wage with no guarantee of hours. The average Zellers store in Canada has about 125 employees. Target boasts that their re-branded stores will have between 150 and 175 employees. The company wants Canadians to believe that this will mean a higher degree of customer service.



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However, in the US the company frequently employs large numbers in their stores, yet refuses to schedule an adequate amount of work hours for each worker. Target employees in the United States, called “Team Members”, often find it extremely difficult to make ends meet. Some are forced to rely on food banks to feed their families. One of the most common complaints among Target workers is that they are not given enough hours to escape the cycle of working in poverty.

Are these the types of jobs we should look forward to? Target thinks so. But many Canadians do not. Ask Target for Fairness is a national campaign that wants the CEO and shareholders of Target to change their minds and do the right thing. We want the corporation to understand that Canadians expect employers to treat workers fairly. We are asking Target to keep the workers in the stores which they have purchased, to recognize their years of service to Zellers, and to honour the wages and benefits they have worked hard to achieve. Ask Target for Fairness brings together Zellers workers, community activists, social justice groups, and the union which represents Zellers workers at 15 stores across Canada.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW Canada) has long-standing collective agreements covering the wages and working conditions at 15 Zellers locations. Of the unionized stores, six were purchased by Target. After selling one of the six to Sobeys, the company announced that the remaining five locations would convert to Target, but that the company would not recognize the collective agreements. UFCW Canada believes Target’s actions could be in violation of provincial labour laws. Therefore, the union is filing applications which call on provincial labour boards to deem Target as the successor employer.

The ability to classify Target as the successor employer at Zellers is one possible avenue to pursue better wages and working conditions for retail workers. This avenue necessitates

that a Zellers must be at least in the process of unionization before it closes for renovations. Judging from Target’s public announcements and the termination notices already received by affected workers, most stores will close this summer. So timing is certainly limited. But the power of collective bargaining, and the capacity to build fair and secure working conditions, is definitely a strategy worth pursuing.

Having a collective agreement at a newly opened Target store could mean the difference between night and day. The precarious nature of retail work itself would be replaced with a significant degree of job security, binding protections and fairness across the board for all workers. Guaranteed wage rates and employee benefits would be something which Team Members themselves would negotiate collectively.

Recently, thousands of Canadians voiced their opposition to the actions of Caterpillar when the American company locked out and then terminated almost 500 workers in London, Ontario. This strong sentiment should be no different when it comes to retail workers. We should expect Target to treat Canadian retail workers with dignity and respect, particularly as the corporation rolls out an aggressive plan to begin attracting our dollars in the near future.

What will Target jobs look like in Canada? Will they be minimum wage jobs, with few hours and no recognition of seniority or experience? Or will they be good-paying, secure jobs where workers are honoured for their years of commitment to the retail sector. The choice belongs to Target. But it is up to all of us, in Manitoba and across the country, to demand that Target makes the right choice.

Kevin Shimmin is a National Representative for UFCW Canada, who is working on behalf of Ask Target for Fairness.



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