

# Why Workers Need their Unions: The Great Atlantic & Pacific Debacle

By Bill Hohlfeld

The demise of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P) has had a dreadful impact on workers in our tri-state area. While it's true that many workers will manage to find, if not comparable, at least suitable positions with other grocery chains, unfortunately, many will not. So, once again where corporate America has left an economic void in workers' lives, their unions try to fill it. Recently, the unions that represent the majority of these workers, the UFCW and the RWDSU sent out a letter to their members who are A&P employees. The importance of this letter is two-fold.

First of all, the letter contains extremely practical information. It directs members to a newly established website <http://www.ufcwmembersresources.com/> which, broken down by state, directs members to local "One Stop Offices" which offer help with everything from resume writing and interviewing techniques to specialized training and career transition counseling. There are even some employers on hand who are ready to hire those who walk in.

(In an effort to make the process as painless as possible, no appointment is necessary.)

Another page lists links to upcoming job fairs, career fairs and current job vacancies. The site is well laid out, comprehensive and user friendly. For all those reasons, it gets high marks indeed.

But there is another reason why sending this letter was important. As anyone who has ever suffered the loss of employment knows, there is something besides income that leaves along with the job. It is dignity. In a culture that so often seems to value us based on the size of our wallets, being told that our "services are no longer needed," or as the Brits so aptly put it, we are "redundant," can be a devastating blow.

That is why, when facing a job loss that is in no way linked to your own inability or desire to perform, it is crucial to hear from your union. In the letter they received from their joint labor organizations, A&P workers were told:

"Please know that you are not facing this tough time alone. The UFCW International, RWDSU, and your Local Union are completely committed to helping you and your families in every way we can."

That was not an empty promise. The services listed on the website will certainly be a huge help in restoring the livelihood of those workers being displaced by another private enterprise nosedive. But the tone of the letter will help as well. It reminds those soon to be ex-A&P employees that they are valuable. They are not throw aways. There are still people out there that know this is not their fault, and that given the choice, they would prefer to get up every morning and go to work, rather than collect an unemployment check.

Not least hard hit is New York's Hudson Valley. In Westchester County, on Nepperhan Avenue in Yonkers, local residents may be left completely without a grocery store that they can access without an automobile. In Rockland County, the Valley Cottage location has not been picked up by another chain and residents are faced with the prospect of thousands of square feet of empty space in the strip mall on Route 303.

The Valley Cottage store is where Trisha Rickner works. She started there as a cashier in 2008, then later became a book



keeper. Unfortunately, with the retail grocery industry's growing affection for a business model that uses part-time help, she could rarely get more than 27 hours a week. So she supplements her income by working 20-25 hours a week at another grocery store (not an A&P) in Orange County. Add onto this the 55 mile commute she makes each day to her home in Warwick, along with raising a son, and you see a woman with a very busy schedule. She has been applying for a full time position at the Orange County store since 2011, but as there is a waiting list, has not yet managed to secure one.

Trisha talked about the added stress that she and her co-workers went through every time a perspective buyer did a walk through, a new rumor was spread, or customers asked them questions for which they had no answers. She spoke about the frustration of carrying on when all you want to say is "this is our livelihood, what we know how to do. We were loyal employees." Trisha's plan for the future is simple. "I'll keep filling out applications. I'll keep trying to get more hours," she says, "but this is definitely going to hurt."

That loyalty Trisha spoke of was evident from the beginning. In an all too familiar scenario, when first faced with bankruptcy, 5 years ago, A&P came to its employees and asked for help. Those employees responded to the call. They submitted to wage freezes, made over \$600 million in concessions and continued to work. Regrettably, the company did not make very good use of all that cash that came from the workers' pockets. They did, however, manage to come up with a generous round of executive bonuses a mere two months before announcing that they were closing up shop. Employees, on the other hand, will be receiving, at best, only 52% of their contractually owed severance pay.

Local 338 Union Representative Kate Fitzpatrick has spent a lot of time at the stores helping out in whatever way possible. On Wednesday, she was facilitating interviews being held by the NYS Department of Labor "The world has changed," she said "some of these people have worked for the company for the past 20 or 30 years. They don't even know how to file for unemployment insurance."

Ms. Fitzpatrick has some frustrations of her own. No matter how hard she and all her colleagues worked to help alleviate the suffering her brother and sister members were going through, there will still be some who will fall through the cracks. "I saw these people get notified that they were being laid off, cry for a minute, then go back to work doing their jobs, helping the customers," she said. "Watching them, I learned that workers can endure a lot, but they shouldn't have to."

When businesses fail, the wreckage spreads like ripples in a pond. Individuals suffer, families tighten their belts, tax bases are compromised, and whole communities feel the impact. Organizations like the UFCW and the RWDSU will continue to work hard and do their best to clean up the mess and respond to the needs of their members. But if current economic trends continue, we will need a lot more than websites to take care of the problem. -LP