

October 2024

THE SERVICE WORKER



“Small Point Cafe Fires Staff in Retaliation for Walkout – Lessons Learned”

Small Point Cafe is a coffee bar and sandwich shop owned by local petit bourgeois Adam Dunn, who also owns Cafe Zoey. Small Point enjoys a prominent location in downtown Providence at 230 Westminster Street.

The cafe pays \$14.00 to \$14.50 as a starting wage before tips, and the tipped wage comes out to roughly 18/hr. Some employees were not given tips during a “training period” following their hire of which they had not been informed. Small Point typically employs college students and other young workers in their 20s or early 30s, with a mostly even mix of full and part-time employees. The job does not offer any benefits, although Mr. Dunn expressed in a job interview that he “wanted to turn it into a real job someday”, implying he is aware that he does not pay workers a living wage. Furthermore, Mr. Dunn was overheard complaining that he “only took home 50k last year” in personal profit despite all of his employees making far less than that. He has also claimed to want to turn the cafe into a worker cooperative for years but has taken no steps to do so, leading some workers to question if he uses that possibility to entice workers into putting up with poor conditions for longer.

Seven of twelve crew members at Small Point, including the manager, walked out on a busy Saturday morning in late June in protest of a variety of offenses from the Mr. Dunn, including but not limited to persistent understaffing, last-minute uncommunicated changes to the schedule (including the need for workers to stay hours longer than their scheduled shifts to close), unrealistic expectations of duties performed during work hours (especially given unilateral and sudden changes to the menu and workflow), late and inaccurate pay, rampant transphobia from Mr. Dunn towards trans employees, and swearing and harsh language from Mr. Dunn as he talked to his employees. The immediate impetus for

the walkout was Mr. Dunn’s morning-of decision to tell one employee to come in late to a shift, leaving only two front-of-house workers instead of three to handle the worst of the Saturday morning rush before the rest of the crew could arrive.

However, the discontent among the crew at Small Point had been brewing for much longer than just that Saturday morning. Long-time workers at the cafe felt that repeated attempts to communicate issues with Mr. Dunn resulted at best in half-baked apologies and promises with no change in working conditions lasting beyond the next week, and that there needed to be consequences for his misbehavior. For example, Mr. Dunn would agree that the cafe was too understaffed to run properly, but would make excuses as to why he couldn’t hire additional workers such as a lack of applicants.

The seven members of the walkout initially had full agreement on the plan to form an independent union and present a list of demands to Mr. Dunn. Quickly, however, some disagreement presented on strategy, with one coworker arguing that presenting demands would be too much too soon, fearing retaliation. The members of the walkout also disagreed about when inform the rest of the twelve total workers about the walkout itself and the plans to form an independent union and present demands, worrying that the other workers might leak information to the boss or stall out meetings with calls for deescalation.

The workers involved agreed not to speak to the boss individually and to insist on a group meeting in person on the deep clean day that week, which incensed Mr. Dunn to the point that upon finding out about the walkout indirectly a few days after the fact, he closed the shop early and locked out workers for the rest of the day, swearing at them in the process. Mr. Dunn kept the shop closed the day after

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and met with six of the seven original strikers, with one member of the walkout refusing to participate over disagreements in tactics and the tone of group discussions. The remaining six had agreed to form an independent union and had drafted a list of demands to present to Mr. Dunn which they had shared with the other workers (those who had not participated in the walkout and were as yet mostly uninformed) that morning. The meeting seemed to go well, with Mr. Dunn folding quickly on his initial threat to fire everyone for their participation and acknowledging that serious changes needed to come to the cafe. Workers from the walkout came in the next day for an untipped deep clean and Mr. Dunn bought the group pizza, chatting amiably with the workers.

Like every attempt at communication before, however, Mr. Dunn’s appearance of willingness to change the cafe for the better turned out to be a mirage. Mr. Dunn was successfully able to divide and conquer the workers over coming days, firing the more politically advanced members of the walkout one by one (including over text) and offering to let the others stay on. Two of the four workers who were offered the chance to stay on stuck to the line and quit in solidarity with those fired, but two others decided to break the line and keep working, including one of the more important workers for the running of the business. Mr. Dunn was able to rehire the missing staff in a matter of days, and although the store did close early a few times in the following week, Mr. Dunn seemed to avoid much of a hit to his profits.

What are the lessons to be learned here? If members of the walkout had all actually refused to come back to work until the owner offered to rehire everyone, as they had originally intended, the independent union might have survived longer. Also, it’s possible that the walkout workers made a mistake

in choosing to delay looping in the rest of the crew after the walkout. If all of the staff had been on board, Mr. Dunn wouldn’t have been able to rely on having a core group of experienced workers remaining to train new hires. Additionally, members of the walkout might have benefitted from contacting outside support prior to the meeting with Mr. Dunn and making it clear that a community boycott was on the table in the event of any retaliation against workers.

Any form of strike (or walkout) against the capitalist class must be applauded and encouraged, even strikes that result in retaliation from the owner without achieving their goals. Every strike, no matter how “unsuccessful”, chips away at the impunity with which bosses and landlords and bankers and business owners and politicians and cops and every other executioner of capital oppresses us all. Solidarity to the workers at Small Point who refused to work under abusive conditions, reclaiming some of their exploited humanity in the process. Their bravery in walking out is credit to service workers everywhere.

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