



Here there be unions

It's complicated. I believe in unions as economic and social counter-weights to the clout employers wield in the workplace. In an era of globalization, outsourcing, downsizing, cutbacks, clawbacks – and record corporate profits, we need strong unions more than ever.

But my story in this issue (page 81) questions the campaign by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts (IATSE), Local 849, to unionize Egg Films, a Halifax production company. Why? IATSE wasn't responding to member concerns or needs when it sought to certify Egg; it was simply seeking entrée into what could be a lucrative source of dues and benefit contributions in a traditionally non-union corner of the entertainment industry.

Egg was just... there.

Union officials themselves have described Egg as a good employer that hires mostly union technicians, treats them well and pays better than union scale. So why single them out when there are probably other, more-in-need-of-unionizing companies in the entertainment business?

There certainly are in other industries.

Consider the often part-time, almost always minimum-wage barista, part of Canada's accommodation and food services industry where nearly a quarter of all new jobs since 2011 were created.

Consider Shelby Kennedy. She's 21; she's been serving coffee since she was 14.

She still recalls the email she received in August 2010 the night before what should have been her next shift at Perks Coffee in Halifax. The shop was closing. She was out of a job. The company would mail her record of employment. "Not even a thank you."

Worse, the company didn't pay its employees their last week's wages and vacation pay. Kennedy complained to the province's Labour Standards Board, which oversees non-union workplaces.

The board tried to collect, failed and gave up. To make worse worst, her second last pay cheque bounced too.

All that cost Kennedy more than \$1,000 she couldn't afford at a time when she'd just begun university. She dropped out soon after.

Still, when she learned in February 2012 that a Second Cup franchise was set to open in the old Perks location, she applied. She liked the franchisee, Kathy Attis. "She seemed very enthusiastic, very hands-on." They talked about Kennedy's desire for morning shifts.

Kennedy says Attis assured her it would happen. It didn't. And working conditions deteriorated. She was assigned five-hour shifts by herself, meaning she couldn't even take a bathroom break, and there was no security in case of trouble.

After Kennedy heard employees at another local café had filed for certification this spring, she and her fellow employees began talking about their own grievances. "At first," she says, "the idea of joining a union seemed like a joke." But then it wasn't. They met with an organizer from the union representing the other café's workers, signed cards, applied for certification.

Although Kennedy may not have realized it at the time, she and her fellow Second Cup servers are part of a much larger movement.

Locally, it's known as Baristas Rise Up – "a worker-led union movement that is fighting to improve working conditions and industry standards in precarious and low-waged café jobs."

In the U.S., a walkout by 200 workers at fast-food restaurants in New York last November triggered a series of strikes by workers in more than three dozen cities who complained that, while they must work two or three Mcjobs just to survive, "top executives... make huge salaries and the corporations make record profits every year."

Before the Second Cup vote, Attis wrote a letter to her employees urging them to vote against the union, but adding: "I recognize your right to join or not join." Soon after they voted, however, three employees were fired and others had their hours drastically reduced. Kennedy, who went from 41 to 18 hours a week, says she was "written up" for allowing someone who wasn't a customer to use the washroom. Attis, Kennedy says, also announced that tips, which used to be divided up between workers at the end of each shift, would now be collected by her and "taxed."

Shelby Kennedy insists she likes being a server. "My favourite part," she says, "are the customers. We get lots of regulars." She joined the union, she says, in part because of her experience at Perks, and in part because "I deserve respect and dignity at work."

She needs a union to get it. | ABM

The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com

Baristas Rise Up is fighting to improve working conditions in precarious and low-waged café jobs.

