

"Mystery Union" Organizes Swiss Chalets

Who is behind the "mystery union" which recently organized Swiss Chalet Barbecue restaurants here in Ottawa, Toronto and Brampton?

The Union is called the Canadian Union of Restaurants and Related Employees. It operates out of a post office box in Toronto, and calls to its telephone number are handled by a telephone answering service.

Local 261 first became aware of this union's activity when Secretary-Treasurer and Business Agent Frank Grella was in Toronto on May 14 for the Ontario Labour Relations Board hearing on the Fuller's Restaurant certification. Bro. Grella noticed that the Ontario Labour Relations Board was hearing the Swiss Chalet certification applications on the same day.

"What made me suspicious," says Bro. Grella, "is that there were five applications on the same day from different cities, with apparently no interventions from the employer or from any employees."

Bro. Grella says this is highly unusual.

"When we applied for Fuller's Restaurant in Ottawa and Nicholson's Restaurant in Pembroke, not only did we have to fight the employer every inch of the way, but we also had to beat off an anti-union petition from employees who said they had changed their minds.

"That is what usually happens when you organize in these restaurants or franchises. How come it was so easy for this other union?"

How did the other union do it?

Local 261 investigated what happened at the Swiss Chalet here in Ottawa.

Sometime late in April or early in May a Mr. William Ferst approached management at the Swiss Chalet here. Mr. Ferst bills himself as "general manager" of the Canadian Union of Restaurants and Related Employees.

He was allowed to speak to some of the employees, and apparently was given permission to hang up a poster with wording to the effect that anyone wishing to join his union could do so by writing to him in Toronto at this post office box.

After his talk to the employees, approximately thirty of the waitresses signed what have been described as "sheets of paper." These may have been membership applications, but none of the waitresses who signed can remember the exact wording on the paper.

Waitresses questioned by Bro. Grella and Business Agent Eleanor Dunn said they had not paid any initiation fee as required by law.

Reporters from the Ottawa Citizen, Globe and Mail and radio station CKOY have made repeated attempts to contact Mr. Ferst by telephone. He has been unreachable.

None of the waitresses questioned knew whether any negotiations towards a collective agreement had taken place. They said they had not been called together to discuss contract proposals, nor had they received any proposals from the Canadian Union of Restaurant and Related Employees. They were advised by Local 261 representatives that to insure they be properly represented at the bargaining table they should insist on electing someone from their group to the bargaining committee. Local 261's representatives also told them about the normal methods of obtaining contract proposals from newly-certified groups of employees, and provided them with sample contracts.

Some of the waitresses said they had been promised a fifteen cent increase. Some indicated they had received it, while others had not. None knew how much money they would have to pay out in union dues.

Bro. Grella describes this situation as "strange."

He is asking these questions: Can it be possible that one man, operating from a post office box, with a telephone answering service do all this? Can it be possible that people do not have to pay an initiation fee to join this union? Can it be possible that a contract was signed without the knowledge of the people involved?