

Clerk gets the axe — from his union

Ron Coulson will be unemployed beginning Sunday because he didn't like his union.

The union ordered him fired from his job as a grocery clerk in a Burlington Safeway store.

He's fighting back with charges laid at the Ontario Labor Relations Board and the Ontario Supreme Court, in a one-man battle that could have far-reaching results.

Coulson, 39, has worked as a Safeway clerk for eight years. For seven of those years, he was a steward in Local 206 of the Retail, Commercial and Industrial Union, an affiliate of the United Food and Commercial Workers.

During that time, he grew to dislike the leadership of Local 206 and the UFCW, and he found other workers who shared his views.

His complaints against Local 206 leaders are many. He says they've violated the UFCW constitution by failing to hold an election for at least 10 years. There's supposed to be a vote every three years.

He also accused the leadership of failing to fight for its workers by allowing the company to move Safeway employees to its new Food Barn discount chain, at wages almost \$3 an hour less than the \$12.71 Safeway rate.

The union has also failed on grievances, he says: "We have grievances that haven't been settled for 15 months."

Earlier this year, Coulson launched a drive to decertify Local 206 as the union representing 1,300 Safeway and Food Barn workers across Ontario.

His plan was to replace the UFCW with the Teamsters — the union already representing Safeway drivers, dairy workers and warehouse workers.

"If we had a strong union in like the Teamsters, we'd have total bargaining power," he said.

He needed a petition signed by 35% of the workers to legally qualify for a decertification vote.

The legally-allotted time ran out on his decertification drive. He was 103 signatures short of the total needed for the vote, so Local 206 was in to stay.

Needless to say, the UFCW wasn't pleased with his attempt. In June, a Local 206 trial board ordered Coulson expelled from the union.

Charles McCormick, president and chief executive officer of the local, sent a letter dated July 3 to Safeway management, informing it of the decision and requesting Coulson be fired.

McCormick gave no reason for the request, other than to say Coulson "is not a member of the union in good standing."

The union operates as a closed shop — meaning management will only accept workers approved by the union.

Coulson argues neither the union nor Safeway has the right to do that.

"The union requests that employee Coulson be released from his employment by the company," McCormick wrote.

Coulson then received a letter dated Aug. 1 from his employer, advising him of the union's request and saying the company "has no choice but to terminate your employment effective Sept. 2, 1984."

Coulson and his lawyer have retaliated by filing labor board charges against both the union and Safeway management. The charges refer to unlawful dismissal, employer interference, and intimidation and coercion. They're also seeking a "cease and desist order against the union."

The Ontario Supreme Court charge is against the union. Coulson is seeking \$25,000 damages plus legal costs from the UFCW, charging violation of rights.

The OLRB charges will be heard September 24 and the court appearance is expected sometime in December. McCormick had little to say about the charges. He said he can't comment fully because of the impending labor board and court hearings.

"We are confident that the board will find that we have not violated the labor relations act," he said.

Asked about Coulson's allegation Local 206 hasn't had an election for at least 10 years, McCormick called it "a pile of utter garbage."

Lou Hogan, Safeway's labor relations manager, had nothing to say when contacted in Winnipeg yesterday.

"We have no comment to make on the matter at all"

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