

UPDATE

SAFeway UNION NEGOTIATIONS

“There will be no compromise”

Advancing an Employee-first Perspective on Store Safety and Customer Complaints

August 23, 2019



“We will be uncompromising on these issues. Sobeys has a chance to take the lead among its competitors and work with us to [...] address these issues.”

- Tom Hesse,

Chief Union Negotiator

While Sobeys continues to emphasize FreshCo as its major bargaining priority in our on-going Safeway negotiations, there are a lot of other important issues facing our members in the stores on a day-to-day basis, right now.

We are continuing to push Sobeys to focus not just on the future but on the present, beyond store configurations and profit and loss margins: **we want Sobeys to focus on the issues that really matter to you and affect you on a day-to-day basis.** That’s what this update is about.

Bargaining progress last week

Over the past months – when not sidetracked by store closures or the company’s slow trickle of details about its FreshCo plans – we have emphasized a number of proposals dealing with ensuring that we all (union members, activists, and representatives) have strong voice and

union visibility in the stores.

Our view that been that, unlike most of its Sobeys stores, **Safeway is a unionized workplace, and Sobeys needs to recognize and respect that in meaningful ways.**

While we have listened to the company on their FreshCo-related priorities, they need to listen to us. **We have become louder in recent months.**

Perhaps in response to our actions in the stores, at the bargaining table, and now at the Alberta Labour Relations Board, the company arrived at bargaining last week with what many of us perceived to be a much more agreeable perspective than we’ve seen from them before.

Last week, we were able to move through a number of proposals in the category of “voice and visibility,” for example, with some success. We have subsequently moved on to other important issues.

If you have any questions, please e-mail bargaining@ufcw401.ab.ca or contact your Representative at your union office.



Talking about customer abuse

Our proposal document contains a number of items aimed at addressing issues we view as critically important to your ability to work safely and with a degree of contentment in the stores. You deserve that very much.

“From Sobeys’ botched takeover of Safeway to the various changes implemented at the store level and throughout the store network,” noted Chief Union Negotiator, Tom Hesse, **“Safeway employees have been on the front lines of Sobeys’ deteriorating relationship with Safeway customers.”**

“So many of our members have shared with us their frustrations about this,” Hesse continued. **“Our members are constantly defending company decisions and managing the unmet expectations of enraged customers.** But this has an impact on the level of comfort our members are able to feel at work.”

In bargaining last week, dozens of Safeway employees stood up and told senior Sobeys officials, “we are the reasons the customers come back,” and “we’re tired of making excuses for your poor decisions and planning.”

Our union bargaining committee challenged the practice of store managers presenting angry customers with gift cards and not defending employees, even when customers have been abusive. We expressed frustration with instances in which management does not seem

to take responsibility for the anger customers feel and how that impacts frontline workers, their sense of self-worth and morale in the stores.

In discussions with Sobeys, we introduced the importance of these issues and looked at what other unionized grocery stores do in these circumstances. We are pushing to have the company **take an employee-centred approach to customer complaints.**

Store security

Our society is changing, and increasing abuse from customers reflects that to some degree. It is becoming almost commonplace to see fierce anger and aggression in public spaces. Grocery stores are not exempt from this trend. **As many of you know all too well, the stores are increasingly dangerous places to work.**

In the United States, it was recently reported that retail workers are more likely to be killed on the job than law enforcement. This brutal statistic is persisting six years in a row. In the wake of the El Paso shooting, the New York Times published a story about how **major discount retailers tend not to do their part to protect customers and staff from an increasingly violent public.**

In Canada, while job-related deaths are dramatically under-reported, we have likely all seen increased aggression from customers in recent years. The means of that aggression is becoming **particularly worrisome and is a risk that should be taken very seriously.**

“We will be uncompromising on this issue,” said Hesse. “Sobeys has a chance to take the lead among its competitors and work with us to find innovative, effective, and employee-centred ways to address these issues.”

“Our lives are too precious,” said union bargaining committee member, Nathan LeBlanc-Fortin, to Sobeys.

We expect that an important part of our discussion next time will engage these issues.

Do you have a story you would be willing to share involving customer abuse and employee security in the stores? Please tell us about it by sending an email to your union bargaining committee.

We are looking at finding new ways to gather more of your stories and add them to the discussion.

Our next bargaining dates

Our next meeting dates are set for September 24-26, 2019, in Calgary. Our bargaining perspective has been of maximum transparency with our members. Come and see the process for yourself!

If you are interested in attending negotiations on your days off, please just let your Union Labour Relations Officer know in advance, and we’ll pass you the details.