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‘We Feel Like We’re Being Treated Equally Now’

Heidi Dahms stayed “kind of low-key” when a union organizing drive started at Fairpoint Telecom in Maine in 2007, one year after she began working in the company’s call center for business clients.

But the more Dahms thought about it, and heard positive things about unions from many people she talked with, she decided to jump in with both feet. “I got involved in the organizing drive and did a lot of talking with people about how a union could help us have a fair workplace, job security, better wages and benefits,” she says.

She and colleagues working on the organizing effort with the Communications Workers of America collected signed cards from a majority of their coworkers. Unlike far too many employers in the United States, Fairpoint stayed on the sidelines during the campaign — no harassment, no mandatory meetings, no firings of union supporters. Once the cards were counted, the company recognized the union.



Heidi Dahms

Fairpoint wasn’t a bad employer, Dahms and other coworkers say. But they felt a union could help make things better. They were unhappy to learn that they earned far less than employees doing the same work at Fairpoint offices in another part of the state that had merged with Verizon. And they felt that they weren’t always treated fairly by supervisors.

“If you were a top salesperson, you got treated better, even though the person next to you might be working just as hard, taking just as many calls,” Dahms says, explaining that customer service representatives don’t get to pick and choose their calls. Successful selling can come down to the luck

of the draw. Hard-working employees who weren’t as lucky were likely “to get in trouble for being even a minute late back from a break,” she says.

She says that’s changing with the union, and expects it will get even better once their nearly-finished negotiations are wrapped up and workers finally

have a first contract.

“I think the managers realize that they’re going to be held to a higher standard now, and that if I get in trouble and the person sitting next to me doesn’t, for doing the same thing, we can file a grievance,” Dahms says.

Leveling the playing field at work has improved morale, she says, and workers who didn’t know each other well have become better acquainted through the union. They feel like they’re part of a team.

“We’re more unified, we talk to each other,” she says. “I think that’s a good thing for a company. There’s not so much nit-picking and talking behind someone’s back. We feel like we’re being treated equally now.”

She wishes that other workers around the country who want to organize a union could have the same opportunity she and her coworkers have had, and that’s why she’s a strong supporter of the Employee Free Choice Act.

“Everyone should be able to have that option,” Dahms said. “There shouldn’t be any recourse, but for lots of workers there is. Unfortunately for them, our experience is the exception, not the rule.”