

Sobeys To Employees: We Prefer To Stay Union Free

**By Andy Georgiades
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TORONTO (Dow Jones)--In response to an organizing drive by the United Food and Commercial Workers, Sobeys Inc. has sent a letter to employees saying it prefers to remain "union-free."

A copy of the letter, signed by Craig Gilpin, president of Sobeys Ontario, was obtained by Dow Jones. It says an "American-based union" is targeting employees of Sobeys, Price Chopper and Foodland, which are supermarket banners operated by Empire Co. (EMP.A.T).

"Contrary to what the UFCW will try to make you believe, this membership campaign is not based on any particular issues or problems that employees are having with their company. Instead, this membership campaign simply provides the UFCW with another way to increase the union's revenues - at a cost to you," the letter says.

A Sobeys spokesman verified the letter was sent, but didn't comment further.

The letter goes on to say that the company's "preference is to remain union-free," as its non-union workers have enjoyed open and honest communication for years through its Guarantee of Fair Treatment and Ethics telephone lines.

While Sobeys operations in Quebec are mostly unionized, the grocer's operations in Atlantic Canada (its home base), Ontario and western Canada are largely without union representation.

The UFCW has said that Sobeys is Canada's second-largest grocer and the UFCW is "the union for retail food workers," hence the national organizing campaign recently launched to unionize the workforce. Unlike Sobeys, competitors such as Loblaw Cos. (L.T) and Metro Inc. (MRU.A.T) are heavily unionized countrywide.

A special Web site to help with the Sobeys organizing effort has been created at www.unionforsobeys.ca.

Erin Kuzz, a management-side labor employment lawyer and partner at Sherrard Kuzz, a member of the Worklaw Network, said many employers mistakenly believe they can't talk to their workers about unions, but Sobeys obviously knows better.

"Employers do have the right to communicate with their employees about unions, as long as they don't do so in a way that's threatening, intimidating or coercive," Kuzz told Dow Jones.

She said unions are getting more aggressive as the rate of unionization in the

private sector declines. Her belief is that organized labor is therefore focusing on jobs that can't be "shipped elsewhere", to counter membership losses from plant closures and outsourcing.

While the sending of a letter is a useful tactic, Kuzz recommends employers in Sobeys' position make an effort to train the frontline-management staff to properly communicate one-on-one with employees.

"You're actually going to persuade people by talking with them, and the key is to make sure that people understand how to do that in a persuasive and lawful way," she said.

In its letter, Sobeys says it will "respect" any decision employees make about joining a union, but that they should ask themselves questions regarding dues payments, how the dues are spent, and why they would want "some stranger" to speak on their behalf.

It adds that such organizing campaigns can distract everyone from the real objective - serving customers - but that it would be "irresponsible of us to sit idly by and allow the UFCW to mislead or pressure our employees into signing union cards."