A Brief History of Union Organizing at Half Price Books

Michael White

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview
A BRIEF HISTORY OF UNION ORGANIZING
AT HALF PRICE BOOKS

MICHAEL WHITE
**Introduction:**

The national dialogue surrounding labor unions, labor disputes, and workplace issues is at a level and focus now unlike any time in recent history. Unionization campaigns at Starbucks, Amazon, and other companies; recent labor disputes such as the Rail Workers, John Deere, Kelloggs, the Writers Guild of America, and SAG-AFTRA; all the labor issues surrounding COVID-19, the ensuing pandemic, and the post-pandemic recovery; and the general social milieu becoming more labor-conscious have all worked to bring labor issues back into the national common conversation.

Of all the amazing and noteworthy campaigns, one smaller yet equally interesting and important unionization campaign is taking place at bookstores across the country: that of the Booksellers of Half Price Books. While Booksellers at various other bookstore companies have an organizing precedence going back to Powell’s Books in the late 1990s, recent union organizing among Booksellers has been growing at a higher frequency and with a higher degree of militancy due to deteriorating living conditions, lack of living wages, lack of preventative health care, and a general degeneration of the career into another bad retail job. Booksellers at Half Price Books, one of the

---

47 Edited by and with contributions from the Half Price Books Workers United National Organizing Committee.


oldest and most expansive bookstore resale chains in the country, have been organizing unions at individual stores since the spring/summer of 2021. Growing to nine unionized stores across five states in the Midwest, these Booksellers might be laying the groundwork for fresh new strategies and concepts of how to organize individual retail stores and at the same time how to build a national unionization effort. With a record of nine union elections and nine wins, Booksellers organizing at Half Price Books might be rewriting how to approach union organizing at retail stores. By organizing at each location individually, building workplace committees, building a wider union apparatus at each store, connecting each store’s organizing committee to a national organizing committee via liaisons, and with the help of locals of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and their amazing resources, Booksellers have staged a highly successful unionization campaign, including a much publicized two-day strike action in Minnesota. The fact that these are all happening in the Midwest should make organizers in the big cities and on the coasts take note. What follows is a brief history of the efforts of Booksellers at Half Price Books to organize their trade, improve their conditions, and gain a better living for themselves and their families.
Union Background/ COVID:

Union organizing at Half Price Books began following the initial COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Half Price Books closed all stores to the public on March 17, 2020. Then on March 25 they shut down all the stores completely when stay-at-home orders began to take effect across the country. At that time HPB laid-off or furloughed a huge portion of its employees, many of whom were Booksellers. Over 2,100 employees, 78 percent of the company’s work force, were put out of work without healthcare, without any notice, without any idea of when they would come back to work.\(^{50}\) Fired and furloughed workers banded together on Zoom meetings, Reddit, GoFundMe, Facebook

Many former managers, assistant managers, and Booksellers contributed their stories of working decades for the company and then being fired instead of furloughed, completely let go in a time of need and uncertainty. Whereas Booksellers with minimal experience and time with the company (making the minimum wage) were usually furloughed indefinitely. When workers came back it was clear that at many stores more senior Booksellers were not coming back, workers who had spent a lifetime building a career with a progressive and fun resale bookstore company were cast aside and not given second thought. Though it was not the case at every store, it seemed to be a general commonality that HPB was more focused on bringing back newer and therefore lower-paid workers to save money; there was no recall by seniority. The company carried on with many stores having significantly reduced staffing and many younger and newer employees. The company also froze wages for all of 2020, so throughout the time of the continuing pandemic, the return to work, masking, the winter of 2020–2021, the holiday shopping season, high prices, and inflation, Booksellers did not receive raises. Most of these new Booksellers were only making between $10 to $11 dollars an hour at this time in 2020, barely enough to survive on, much less to use to build a life.

**Background of HPB:**

Half Price Books as a company prides itself on being more progressive, supporting many social causes and charity organizations, and providing a higher standard of living than most retailers to its employees. The company was initially conceived and founded by visionary Ken Gjemre, a

---

veteran of World War II, former Zales salesman, and later a progressive anti–Vietnam War
corporate dropout. Gjemre’s partner was Pat Anderson, described as the realist of the duo who
contributed the financial and business know-how to Gjemre’s ideas. She was the one who put the
down payment on the initial company plan and kept the business running day-to-day. Gjemre, a
more idealistic thinker, wanted to establish a used book and music store that operated on more
equitable ideals than most retailers. The idea and model were so successful that the business
spread and over time grew, expanded, established stores in other states, developed warehouses and
shipping, and organized a more structured corporate enterprise. Though for most of Ken’s and
Pat’s lives the model stayed true to its initial ideals. Workers were paid well for retail, workers had
decent health care completely paid for by the company, were provided childcare or compensation
for it, and received paid hour-long lunches among many other pro-worker benefits. Booksellers
had a say in the sections they ran, in monthly meetings with managers and other workers. The
company was transparent and accountable to the Booksellers, who at the time had a stake with
good options to buy stock. Along with that, the company also developed a system of profit sharing,
quarterly bonuses, a holiday bonus, and contributions to 401k accounts. Booksellers had the
opportunity to move up in the company, which used to have a strict policy of only hiring from
within. From the beginning, Gjemre and Anderson designed the company to be environmentally

52 Dan Baldwin, “Politics Half Priced, Full of Dreams: Ken Gjemre is bookish, a Unitarian, a member of the ACLU,
and he won’t take money from PACs. He also wants to unseat the most conservative man in the Texas Senate,” D-

53 Cheryl Hall, “Store Runs Counter To Corporate Culture -- Half Price Books: Offbeat Place,” Seattle Times, Dallas

54 Jill Andresky Fraser, “The Case for Capping Salaries Maximizing Profitability Through an Egalitarian System of

55 Betsy Light, “Founder’s Hoosier Values Underlie success of Bookstore Chain.” Indianapolis Star, April 22, 1992,
p. C-3.
friendly, to help recycle books and other media, to act as a way to save things from the dump. Interestingly enough, the more one looks at Gjemre, the more it seems Ken had become more progressive, community-minded, environmentally conscious, democracy-oriented, and even what we might call Socialist in a modern sense. He was quoted in his life as being a believer in “industrial democracy.”

Gjemre’s countercultural personal ideals, the business practices he implemented, and the vision he had for HPB being a refuge for musicians, artists, and humanities majors to build a life outside of the corporate rat-race made him beloved by his employees throughout his life.

**How the Company Changed:**

Over time though, and as new leaders came up, and the company spread and expanded, the culture and ideals of the company were corrupted and altered. Eventually Ken left leadership of the company to Pat, Pat passed away a few years later, and one of Pat’s daughters, Sharon Anderson Wright, took over as CEO and president of HPB. Initially some worried she might sell the company, but she did not and for some time kept things operating the same. Though by the early 2000s, and after the death of Gjemre in 2002, the company began to change dramatically. To keep up with other book and media stores, HPB began to develop database systems and an online presence, and out of that came the need to barcode items to sell online, and further computerized database systems, modules that assisted Booksellers in doing the buy-back process, and POS cash registers. Everything was made scannable and many long-held, hard-learned Bookseller trade secrets and skills were made obsolete. The profession of Bookseller, which once took months and

56 Ibid.

months, sometimes years, to fully grasp and learn, was now mostly done with computer programs; the trade had been deskilled and computerized. 58 Within this idea of digitizing each store’s inventory is that it not only gives the company a robust online presence but means that each store acts as a mini-warehouse for online inventory and as a pick-up and distribution center for the company at-large. So, each Bookseller is performing the simultaneous duties of retail customer service rep, warehouse stocker, and inventory taker all in one, thereby increasing the profitability of each store, projecting the brand further, and helping HPB increase its online market. 59 Sharon Anderson Wright’s tenure as head of HPB has been an era of intense expansion, going from 47 stores in 1993, to 61 stores by 1999, and now in 2023 there are over 120 locations throughout the country. One of her first big acts as CEO was to build a new and massive flagship store in Dallas, Texas. The massive complex has over 55,000 square feet of space, bigger sections, two special rooms for reading and art exhibits, space for local café, huge windows with natural lighting, loading, shipping, and pricing areas; in general, the store is a massive version of the other smaller stores, even bigger than the outlet locations with considerably more staffing and streamlined operating system of production and processing. 60

HPB developed a corporate structure that became a mystery to most on-the-ground Booksellers, and new subsidiaries and divisions of HPB emerged, inventing new corporate positions while the company began to take benefits and privileges away from Booksellers. Older


Booksellers reveal that the company seems to have done away with health care first, instituting a three-tiered option plan with the lowest still being paid for by the company if an employee was full-time, with the next two tiers increasing in coverage and in cost. While the options are good to have theoretically, most employees can only afford the lowest tier option, which does not cover many costs of preventive medicine, essentially providing reactive care when any health issues do arise. And the coverage of the lowest tier option is not good, persons with serious illnesses could not fight a condition with complicated procedures and pay medical bills. The lowest-tier insurance option is there, but it’s nothing that’ll help in a serious time of need. As well, the company once provided childcare and the ability for Booksellers to bring children to work or provided parents with the ability to afford it. Both are things of the past now. Not too long ago, Booksellers had a full hour of paid lunch, meaning that Booksellers once were able to get a full 40-hour work week. The company did away with that, making the hour lunch break unpaid, meaning a full-time worker can only get up to 35 hours a week! Eventually HPB began expanding its business practices into real-estate, buying the lot across the street from the flagship store in Dallas, developing it, and renting space to other retailers and for offices.  

This multi-million dollar endeavor was started in the early 2010s and has continued to this day. Now called the BookMark Center, the space is rented to REI, for office spaces, and includes a stand-alone Starbucks location. As well as having other office buildings, parking lots, and other possible plans for development. Community members have voiced concern over the project as displacing historically disenfranchised residents by raising

---

61 Jason Heid, “Trader Joe’s, Looking For Your First Dallas Store Location? Give Half Price Books a Call.” *DM Magazine*, May 3, 2011, https://www.dmagazine.com/frontburner/2011/05/trader-joes-looking-for-your-first-dallas-store-location-give-half-price-books-a-call/. Jason Heid discusses Sharon Anderson Wright’s excursions into the world of high-end real-estate and development! There is actually a ton more info on this, as apparently HPB has bought, sold, developed, and leased properties and storefronts throughout the 2010s in Texas. One of these projects is a shopping center (something that sounds like it’s akin to a mall).
rents and costs and driving out economically disadvantaged people, gentrifying the area. HPB leaders have also bought and developed their own side businesses, including the margarita mix company Ready Rita and Rooster Home and Hardware, an urban landscaping and farming company. Over about two decades HPB became antithetical to its original founding ideals and motives, corrupting the vision of Ken Gjemre and Pat Anderson, and actively doing away with many of the standards and policies that made it a uniquely good career. Leadership at HPB intentionally de-skilled the Bookseller position, computerized the work process, and rescinded many worker-friendly company policies to increase profitability for the benefit of HPB leadership and Sharon Anderson Wright.

Organizing in Minnesota:

Unionizing had been on the minds of many fired and furloughed Booksellers throughout 2020, but steps were not taken until the spring of 2021. Booksellers in Minnesota began organizing throughout the spring and summer of 2021 and, after a thorough and well-orchestrated organizing drive, Booksellers at four of the six stores around the Twin Cities area of St. Paul and Minneapolis filed for elections to have union representation. On October 14, 2021, Booksellers at locations at Roseville and St. Paul went public with their union-organizing campaign when they filed for an election to have union representation. The next day workers at the Northtown store went public as

---


being part of the campaign. And not too long after that Booksellers at the St. Louis Park store also went public as part of the campaign and filed for an election to have union representation. Finally sensing the outrage and in an attempt to stop more Booksellers from organizing, just four days after the unionization campaigns went public HPB raised all Bookseller base hourly wages from what they were in late 2021 from $12 to $13. A few weeks later base hourly wages were raised again from $13 per hour to $14 per hour. And then even later, after more stores went public, HPB raised base starting hourly wages from $14 to $15. As starting base wages went up, others’ wages were also adjusted and raised; unionizing was already having clearly successful results. The company raised wages because of unionization efforts and the campaigns going public, they didn’t raise wages out of the goodness of their hearts. Booksellers had worked throughout this time with organizers and representatives of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW). UFCW staff in the two locals that represent Booksellers in Minnesota had helped Booksellers through the process, giving legal and organizing advice and helping coordinate efforts. Booksellers initiated and controlled the entire endeavor, but without help from the UFCW it would have been far more difficult to navigate all the legal requirements and hurdles that come up when trying to organize a union.

**Demands and Reasons Behind Organizing:**

Booksellers in Minnesota set the tone for demands when they went public with their campaign in October 2021, though each store’s Booksellers are negotiating their own contract. All the organizing stores have worked together, aiming for many of the same items to be included in

---

negotiated contracts. The main demands that Booksellers want contracts to address include: union recognition, a living wage, job security and transparency, improved communications, better health and safety systems, better training, and overall respect and dignity in the workplace from the company and from customers. Each of these points represents several different parts or aspects of the contracts Booksellers want to negotiate. The idea is to improve the workplace, improve the company, improve Booksellers’ lives, make the workplace safer, make it more functional, and to give Booksellers a way to feel like they have a stake and a say in the company whose success they contribute to.

Each of the organized stores has particular issues stemming from specific situations on the ground. Some stores have issues with bad customers or stalkers and need security. Some have focused on their healthcare packages. Issues with out-of-date technology and broken tools have led to clauses guaranteeing access to functioning and safe tools and technology (such as computers, scanners, price guns, library and flat carts, box tape guns, box-cutters). Overall, the stores are working together to make sure each gets many of the same protections, making a kind of blueprint for a standard contract to use as a model for more stores as they go public with their own campaign.

In general, having the basic protections that a union contract gives is the most important aspect—including having a union steward on the job, grievances procedure, seniority, recall in case of shut down, codified steps for disciplinary actions, enhanced guaranteed legal protections, guaranteed competitive wages and raises, increased transparency from the company, improved safety

---

65 For further explanation of demands, see *Half Price Books Workers United*, [https://www.ufcw.org/actions/campaign/half-price-books-workers-united/](https://www.ufcw.org/actions/campaign/half-price-books-workers-united/).

conditions and standards, and more respect for workers from management and the company. In essence, having more rights as a worker on the job.  

Organizing Outside of Minnesota:

Over fall and winter of 2021–2022, as the Booksellers in Minnesota filed for election, went public, and moved forward with their election to have union representation, Booksellers in Greenwood, Indiana, began their own endeavor. Booksellers at the Greenwood location, on the southside of Indianapolis, organized throughout the winter and into the early spring of 2021–2022, finally going public with their organizing effort in early March 2022, and having their election for union representation on April 1, 2022. At the same time, Booksellers in Niles, Illinois, began organizing, meeting together, and moving forward with their own union campaign. The Niles location had their election for union representation on May 7, 2022. Throughout these campaigns and election processes, HPB actually continued to improve the workplaces, trying to appease workers. They put in better floor mats, installed new cleaning supply cabinets, improved any maintenance problems, took steps to address any safety concerns, replaced old and faulty breakroom chairs and tables, improved basic issues, and made repairs throughout the stores. But by the summer and fall of 2022, two more stores had gone through the organizing process and


went public with their union-organizing campaigns in similarly to the previous stores. In August 2022, Booksellers at the Hurstbourne, Kenntucky, store filed for election for union representation; they had their election on September 23, 2022.70 On October 10, 2022, Booksellers at the Wichita, Kansas, store filed for their election for union representation; they had their election on November 17, 2022.71 It was around this time that HPB finally raised starting base hourly wages a third time from $14 to $15 for all nonunion stores, but in a vindictive act made the union stores bargain for their raise (which they all eventually obtained).

Following Wichita’s lead and seeing all the progress union organizing had brought, Booksellers at the Overland Park, Kansas, location soon began their organizing efforts, connected with Booksellers in Wichita, then the wider organizing apparatus of previously unionized stores. Overland Park had had significant issues throughout the summer during a store move from an old location to a new location. The older location had excessive mold, bad air conditioning, and no help from district or regional managers. When the move finally happened, the air conditioning went out and Booksellers were made to box up and move books in June in the Kansas heat. Some Booksellers got sick and complained, some questioned whether they would get hazard pay. The only relief that HPB provided were popsicles, Gatorade, and cheap box fans. Following these dangerous conditions, Booksellers undertook a fantastic under-the-radar organizing campaign at their location. Booksellers at the Overland Park location voted unanimously for union


representation on July 20, 2023. Winning their election with a vote count of 14 to 0, all Booksellers voted in favor of union representation.

Though at Overland Park, HPB tried to have one of their company lawyers be the company representative during the union vote, because they couldn’t get any Bookseller to act as the company’s representative. During an in-store union vote a worker-representative for both the union and the company are chosen to check off each eligible voter as they enter to vote. Because no Bookseller wanted to act as the company’s representative, the company tried to get a company lawyer who had been previously involved in union-busting activity to act as their representative on behalf of the company. HPB was not permitted to do so by National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) representatives on the election day, the lawyer was asked to leave the voting area, and HPB had to choose a Bookseller. HPB filed an objection on the grounds that they were not allowed to choose a pro-company person (because following the vote it became apparent that the entire staff voted in-favor of the union). So HPB filed a complaint, an objection, claiming that there was some kind of impropriety. The only impropriety that existed was trying to use a union-busting lawyer as their in-store vote representative to try to influence and intimidate Booksellers. Regardless of this obviously false and fabricated objection that is still being mitigated by the NLRB (which the company is obviously using to slow the entire process of union recognition), every store, all nine, won their union elections with clear uncontested majorities, despite the company’s aggressive union-busting tactics.

**Challenges in Organizing:**

Booksellers at each of the nine stores had different organizing experiences and faced different challenges in building their unions in the workplace. Generally, though, each went through the steps of building an organizing committee on the job at each store whose members navigated the
tasks of talking to other Booksellers, meeting with them off the clock, explaining what was happening, and trying to get them involved. As the organizing efforts gained steam, the groups of Booksellers at each individual store would meet via Zoom or in public to plan steps, strategize, develop tactics, and discuss happenings at their stores. Social gatherings were also a way to build more group cohesion, helping Booksellers to get to know each other outside of work and build the networks of communication and trust necessary in organizing. Throughout this time UFCW organizers would work with the Booksellers’ organizing committees, helping to guide them through the process, offering advice, and teaching Booksellers the finer points of union organizing. Had it not been for the help of the UFCW, Booksellers’ organizing efforts might not have been so successful.

Throughout the entire process of organizing, each of the unionized stores and stores still in the process of organizing would meet a few times a month via Zoom. Booksellers held old-school style union meetings via Zoom using Rusty’s Rules of Order, a simplified version of Robert Rules of Order, with a chair, co-chair, and recording secretary, and would work through an agenda that included updates, new business, old business, good and welfare, and general labor news. At these meetings, Booksellers of the union stores met, updated each other, strategized, coordinated, planned actions, and built their union movement. Through these many meetings Booksellers grew together, shared in many happy times, and helped each other through struggles and hard times. These meetings were used to coordinate events and actions, spread information, share experiences, and generally support each other in the many tasks involved in organizing the workplace.

**Deliberate Union Busting:**

Half Price Books has staged an aggressive and blatant union-busting campaign. At each of the stores the formula was generally the same. Upon filing for union election when each campaign
went public, and until the actual vote, HPB began their union-busting campaign. HPB began by having meetings with staff notifying them of the filing and upcoming elections, acting blindsided and unaware of problems, sometimes doing these in small groups or one-on-ones. These were the beginning of the captive audience meetings. HPB used the opportunity to take note of Booksellers’ reactions, asking them how this could be or if people knew more—trying to shake people down and taking notes of anything they said or how they acted. From there HPB brought in district managers, assistant district managers, regional managers, and sometimes other upper-level corporate leaders to “help out” Booksellers in their daily duties on the sales floor. These managers would “help out” at the buy counter, pricing books, sometimes shelving, sometimes working the registers, just there to “help out and answer any questions.” These upper level managers were constantly there, breathing down people’s necks, criticizing Booksellers’ work, meanwhile mucking up everything they touched, mispricing, misshelving, moving slowly, not knowing how to operate the computer programs, and getting in the way. The intention was to have as many managers on the ground to hamper and disrupt unionizing activities, stop conversations about work, and to make people fearful and quiet.

After the initial meetings of notification, HPB would have captive audience meetings almost every day or every other day throughout most weekdays. Sometimes in big groups, sometimes in smaller groups, sometimes as one-on-ones. Each of these meetings was designed to deter people from wanting to unionize and to vote ‘no’ on the upcoming election, to gather more information about the efforts, to determine where people stood, and to single out union leaders. HPB used the captive audience meetings to spread lies about unions and the unionization process, at one point using the negative and outdated trope that unions are corrupt by citing Jimmy Hoffa as an example! HPB used the captive audience meetings to spread lies and distort truths about the
UFCW locals representing Booksellers and the UFCW in general, citing court cases the locals had been involved in, implying the president is corrupt, and implying the union doesn’t help its members. In each of these meetings not only were store managers present, but so were district and regional managers, and in many cases corporate human resources officers and lawyers sent from company headquarters in Dallas, Texas. In many cases it was the human resources officers and lawyers doing the heavy lifting of voicing the biggest lies and mistruths. One of the stores was able to count someplace around 30 meetings with staff in various configurations in the one month (31 days) between going public and having their union election. That’s at least one captive audience meeting almost every day! HPB used these meetings to keep track of who were pro-union and who were on-the-fence or against the unions, they used this to organize their own opposition to the union, gather information, and to get a pro-company person to represent the company during elections. At some stores the company actively organized a ‘vote-no committee’ of workers confused by the union process and issues at hand, using their fear of retaliation to push workers to vote ‘no’. These captive audience meetings varied in length from 5 mins to an hour or more, varied in how many people and who were in them, but were done with a strategy to lie, confuse, intimidate, separate, and scare Booksellers into submission.

**Facing the ‘Boots’:**

The day or two before the elections, after a progressively increasing hierarchy of managers, corporate lawyers, and human resources officers descended, most of the stores were graced with the presence of both HPB president Kathy Doyle Thomas and HPB CEO Sharon Anderson Wright, nicknamed “Boots.” Wright flew to each location from Dallas, Texas, to deter Booksellers in captive audience meetings that were unhinged, demeaning, threatening, and completely unprofessional. “Boots” presented herself as being all over the place: Booksellers in some
meetings would get a nice and understanding person, trying to act as a friend of the people; while Booksellers in other meetings would be cursed at, yelled at, interrupted, berated, demeaned, aggressively challenged, and threatened at every point. In most stores there were two meetings: one usually with more pro-union type people, the other with people perceived to be anti-union or on-the-fence. In the captive audience meetings with anti-union workers and workers on-the-fence, Wright was friendly, acted like a fellow Bookseller and friend, talked about the history of the company, how hard the pandemic years had been for everyone, and told Booksellers why she thought we did not need a union, acting nice all the while. In the captive audience meetings with the people thought to be pro-union Wright truly showed Booksellers why people called her “Boots.” Wright used those meetings to talk-down, demean, insult, curse at, yell at, and outright threaten workers.72 “Boots” would use those meetings to bust the union, lie about the union, tell people outright to “vote no,” and lie to them about how things would improve if they voted “no.” She was repeating much of what had already been said by other managers, but coming from the CEO and founder’s daughter it revealed the company’s desperation and determination to stop organizing efforts.

At the captive audience meeting in Greenwood, Indiana, Wright claimed the company was “her baby” and threatened workers to “not fuck with me” all while acting extremely aggressively, threatening, and displaying seriously disturbing unprofessional behavior. She actively goaded people into participation during the mandatory meeting, called people out, attempted to provoke people, and made people involved with that meeting feel exceedingly uncomfortable and unsafe. At one point “Boots” threatened one of the pro-union leaders, misgendering them, interrupting

---

them, yelling at them about why they were wrong about conditions being bad, effectively shutting them down in an extraordinarily embarrassing and demeaning manner. Wright talked about how she would refuse to talk to stores that choose to unionize, how she was disgusted in the union’s proposed contract she had seen so far, though in the same breath explained that she was pro-union and comes from a union family background (trying to garner sympathy, make herself seem progressive, like she is friend of the working people). Wright claimed Amazon needed a union, but HPB did not, because “we are a family.” She told Booksellers concerned about wages, conditions, cost of housing, and prices—people that made her rich, gave her multiple businesses, and gave her the horses and stables she owns—that “life’s hard.” At one point when voicing concerns about rising prices, one Bookseller said they can’t even afford new shoes for the job, which requires Booksellers to stand, get up and down on stools, walk and run back and forth, and lift heavy boxes for their entire shifts. “Boots” was under the impression that one could “buy some shoes for $40,” apparently not aware that decent working footwear is exceedingly more expensive. Wright reiterated several times that “nobody fucks with me” to employees faces, openly threatening them because they wanted living wages, stable employment, and union recognition. She was obviously delusional and the other managers and corporate lawyers at the meeting had a hard time reeling her in and calming her down. Several times HPB President Kathy Doyle Thomas had to step in and help smooth over the bad language, harsh threats, and open union busting Wright was engaged in. She clearly demonstrated that she didn’t comprehend the struggles her own employees were facing as far as housing and costs of living, medical and prescription costs, and general lack of competitive wages and guaranteed stable benefits. Wright was so degrading, humiliating, and aggressive that she in some cases managed to scare workers into voting against the union, thinking they would be retaliated against for voting “yes.” Wright floated the idea that she would retaliate
against workers for unionizing, she would not forget it, nor would she work with them in the future. The things Wright did at the Greenwood, Indiana, meeting alone constitute violations of labor laws concerning intimidation and threats, her behavior was appalling, her actions and words violent, and all done in a failed attempt to stop people from making a living wage. And this was just one of the nine locations. All nine unionized locations have similar atrocious stories about district managers, regional managers, corporate heads, and company leadership coming to their stores and implementing many of the same vile and appalling anti-union, union-busting tactics.

**A Seat at the Bargaining Table:**

Since the nine stores have unionized each has been moving forward in contract bargaining negotiations. As of August 2023, the Minnesota stores, the Greenwood location, and the store in Niles, Illinois, are all about halfway through the bargaining process, done with most of the non-economic contract items and moving into the economic items (wages, raise rates, scheduling of raises, sick time, vacation time, and personal time). The other three stores are in various early phases of bargaining. Meanwhile, HPB has secretly hired multiple new lawyers, labor relations managers, human resources representatives, and has undergone some upper-level corporate reshuffling. HPB is spending millions on these new corporate labor relations positions and on legal defense, even going as far as hiring the anti-union employment law firm Ogletree-Deakins, the same far right-wing, pro-business, anti-worker law firm Donald J. Trump used to fight off unionization efforts at his Atlantic Casinos. Ogletree-Deakins makes millions fighting

---

unionization efforts, targeting labor leaders, destroying community-based movements, destroying lives and livelihoods with no moral conscience about the evil deeds they do that make this world a worse place. This is the law firm representing Half Price Books, a supposedly progressive and family-run company.

At the bargaining table, HPB has been consciously and strategically obstructing negotiations. Each unionized store is negotiating its own contract. At each location HPB and its lawyers have developed a pattern of not giving bargaining dates, not responding to emails, being late to bargaining sessions, being ill-prepared, canceling dates at the last minute, sitting in caucus for hours wasting time, and being exceptionally slow to respond with counterproposals or possible language. Multiple times the different UFCW locals have had to bring Unfair Labor Practice lawsuits to the NLRB against HPB to get them to even begin to bargain, give dates, or maintain bargaining in good faith. Lawyers for HPB are demeaning, and use crude and unprofessional language; a certain lawyer even seems to exclusively wear pajamas to bargaining sessions when everyone else is dressed more professionally for the occasion—displaying how little they care to bargain professionally in good faith. In most instances of negotiations on items, the company is extremely resistant to Booksellers’ proposals, barely budging, and barely able to understand Booksellers’ point of view. Booksellers and the UFCW show up ready, but HPB and their lawyers have to spend most of the day in caucus to go over something we said we would all read before the meeting. Or will spend the entire time considering a proposal only to give Booksellers their counterproposal a minute or two before the end of the session.

The company finds ways to waste time in bargaining, to do as little work as possible, to do anything to avoid working through another agreement. They only give Booksellers one or two four-hour sessions a month at each location, making the entire process for getting through each article or section tedious and cumbersome. Half Price Books will do anything and everything to resist and extend negotiations with the intent being that they think the effort will lose steam, people will get disillusioned, quit, or get fired. Booksellers won the first step: their elections to have union representation. Booksellers still need to win their second step: to negotiate, bargain, and vote affirmative on their contract before they become full union members with protections under a contract. Until then Booksellers have only minimal protections, and technically HPB still operates in their status quo, meaning there is no union steward, union protection coverage is legally gray and not fully available, and HPB can still discipline and reprimand Booksellers any way they see fit. Half Price Books is currently and actively trying to prevent Booksellers from successfully negotiating a contract, which would in turn kill the union drive.

**Continued Retaliation:**

Besides obstructing and delaying the bargaining process, HPB has been involved in clear and old-fashioned retaliation. Corporate leaders at HPB have put local store managers and assistant managers in tough positions of enforcing their anti-union stance. Store managers and assistant managers at many of the unionized stores have begun to target pro-union Booksellers and leaders of the movement to unionize. At a few locations, Booksellers have been targeted so thoroughly that they have elected to resign and leave the company rather than face such blatant and serious harassment and negligence from management and HPB. Some have pursued legal routes, filed NLRB complaints, and successfully sued the company. At other locations, Booksellers have been terminated on bogus charges or first infringements. HPB has encouraged workers to argue, bicker,
and have long-running disputes; encouraging workers to fight among themselves. Managers don’t help or de-escalate the situation, then highlight it as a reason why unions are bad, citing the unions as the cause of the problems. HPB’s Human Resources, the same people responsible for the most heinous lies, threats, and time-wasting captive audience meetings, have now hired more lawyers and labor management specialists and are staging a premeditated, calculated, and strategically motivated anti-union/union-busting campaign. Albeit quiet, in the shadows, and behind the scenes, HPB has tactically undertaken clear retaliation in attempts to bust the unionization at each store by getting rid of and forcing out union leaders. Knowing they have all the time on their side, knowing that they can delay proceedings, knowing that they can get away with some of the most dastardly union-busting retaliatory tactics, HPB has maintained the facade that they are good to their employees, politically progressive, and socially open-minded.

**A Strike in Response:**

In response to the anti-union union-busting tactics of HPB, their president, CEO, and growing team of company lawyers, Booksellers at the four unionized stores in Minnesota went on a two-day strategic strike. The strike was undertaken because the union alleged “that Half Price Books management has failed ‘to provide crucial information to union representatives during the contract negotiation process.’” For many months the company has refused to share information requests by the various organizing committees and the UFCW locals that represent organized workers.

---

When workers at the Minnesota locals finally made it to the portion of contract negotiations that included economic items such as wages, sick/vacation/leave time, raises, and other items that have an actual dollar sign attached to them, HPB and their team of lawyers basically refused to budge an inch. HPB offered an insulting increase of only 1%, while at the same time throughout the negotiations violating federal labor law on multiple occasions, claiming that the company couldn’t afford a better wage increase (without giving any information as to the finances of the company, the CEO’s or president’s pay, or how much they spend on company lawyers). These awful proposals and the way HPB was treating its loyal workers incensed Booksellers, insulted their years and years of dedication to the company, and showed that HPB higher-ups didn’t care about the livelihoods of its workers; they wanted to keep as much of the company’s profits as they could for themselves.75

At the same time, HPB wanted the Booksellers to give up their already agreed-upon quarterly bonuses, which HPB had been giving since the founding of the company under Ken Gjemre’s ideals of industrial democracy and sharing the profits the company made with the actual people who make the company’s money. In response Booksellers from these four locations voted unanimously to go out on a strategic two-day strike. Booksellers set up pickets, marched out in front of the four locations, held signs, chanted, and handed out information about their organizing efforts. The striking Booksellers made it known how awful HPB was in negotiations, how they were using union-busting tactics, and how their proposals were humiliatingly low and insincere. Booksellers had an outpouring of public support both locally from customers, many who said they would avoid HPB until they began negotiating in good faith, and on social media where pictures

75 Niepow, “Half Price Books Workers Strike at Four Minnesota Stores.”
of proud striking Booksellers abounded. HPB was publicly shamed, and rightfully so, they were engaged in some of the worst negotiating tactics that money could buy (and they have spent an estimated millions on their team of right-wing, anti-union, union-busting lawyers), all to avoid giving their loyal workers a living-wage, better benefits, and a piece of the wealth that the Booksellers created. Following the strike, Booksellers went back to work with renewed vigor and purpose, the public supported them, and they were more organized and focused than at any time prior.

**Next Steps and Conclusions:**

Despite the anti-union sentiment within the company, despite union-busting before and after the elections, and despite clear retaliation against union leaders, Booksellers at all nine locations are making progress in leaps and bounds. As was said already, six of the unionized stores are a little more than halfway done with their contract bargaining, having more than half the articles tentatively agreed to; the other three are in the beginning phases of contract negotiations and union recognition. While HPB has been doing their best to resist negotiations and to slow them down, Booksellers have been persistent, proactive, and continuously involved. Booksellers come to the table having counters and proposals ready to go, having an idea of what to do next, and having the help of the UFCW. Booksellers at the Minnesota locations have staged a few other actions besides the strike, talking to customers outside, setting up informational pickets, passing out information, and coordinating wearing shirts and pins. The UFCW and all the organized stores have a coordinated social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and are constantly sharing updates, news, photos, and memes. Booksellers at all locations have contributed to making informational bookmarks, writing articles, and putting together information packets for the public to spread the word of the organizing efforts. Booksellers have used various social media platforms
to institute more direct communications; platforms such as Slack and Discord have been tantamount to building the movement across state lines; they also help get new Booksellers situated, educated, and further involved. Booksellers at the unionized Minnesota locations have even participated in a recorded conference on the subject of unionizing at bookstores put on through the East Side Freedom Library, in St. Paul, Minnesota. All the while, the UFCW has assisted in connecting new Booksellers interested in joining the cause and helping the work along. Booksellers at all nine unionized locations meet regularly, communicate every day, and look forward to having more join their numbers—increasing the momentum and success of the union organizing effort as a whole.

This is only the first chapter, of the first volume, of the first set of organizing at HPB—more stores will follow. By organizing at each location individually, building workplace committees, building a wider union apparatus at each store, connecting each store’s organizing committee to a national organizing committee via liaisons, and with the help of locals of the UFCW and their amazing resources, Booksellers have already won nine out of nine elections for union representation. More than that, they have built a structured, goal-oriented, and highly motivated union organizing campaign across the Midwest, outside of the usual areas of union organizing, especially for the retail industry. The uniqueness, determination, and success of Booksellers in the way they built their unionization effort is an important narrative that can be used to draw lessons for other retail and service industry workers and their unionization campaigns. A handful of organized and motivated workers can make a difference and change the conditions of their life and labor for an entire company. To help support the effort, get involved, or find out more, check

out the social media pages. Just search “Half Price Books Workers United,” on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram to get more information. Or reach out to your local UFCW; they can help you and put you in touch with Booksellers from the unionized stores. Keep a lookout for more unionized HPB stores whose stories and triumphs are yet to be published.77 And never forget that “alone we can do so little, but together we can do so much!”78


78 A quote regularly used by humanitarian and union advocate Hellen Keller in her many speeches and writings.
## Appendix: List of Bookstores That Have Unionized

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Store Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Union Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Powell’s</td>
<td>Portland, OR</td>
<td>1998-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Strand</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Book Culture</td>
<td>Morningside Heights, NYC</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Book People</td>
<td>Austin, TX</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>McNally Jackson</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Elliot Bay Book Company</td>
<td>Seattle, WA</td>
<td>March 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Bookshop Santa Cruz</td>
<td>Santa Cruz, CA</td>
<td>Feb. 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Moe’s</td>
<td>San Francisco, CA</td>
<td>April 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Skylight Books</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Greenlight Bookstores</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>August 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Indigo Stores</td>
<td>Toronto, CAN</td>
<td>August 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Half Price Books</td>
<td>Greenwood, IN</td>
<td>Voted April 1, 2022!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography

Secondary Sources:


Gomez, Amanda Michelle. “Politics and Prose Bookstore Employees Move to Unionize.”


Hagemann, Hannah. “Bookshop Santa Cruz employees unionize: Formation was finalized by a vote and announced Friday.” (Bookshop Santa Cruz) Santa Cruz Sentinel, Feb. 5, 2021, https://www.santacruzsentinel.com/2021/02/05/bookshop-santa-cruz-employees-unionize/.


Irwin, Veronica. “Moe’s Books Employees Unionize, Rally Saturday: Workers at the Berkeley


Miller, Angie. “American and Soviet soldiers to meet again at Elbe.” UPI, April 3, 1985,


Otts, Chris. “Workers at Half Price Books in Louisville Seek Union Election.” WDRB, Aug. 17, 2022,


Segal, Corinne. “Here’s a running list of bookstores that have unionized.” *Literary Hub*. May 18, 2021, https://lithub.com/heres-a-running-list-of-bookstores-that-have-unionized/.


Union Advocate, “Insulted by 1% wage offer, Half Price Books Workers Strike.” *The Union*


“Pandemic sparks union activity where it was rare: Bookstores.” MPRNEWS


Primary Sources:


“I Am So Excited To Unionize Because I Know It Will Help Us To Be Compensated Appropriately For The Work We Do - In Minnesota, Workers ‘Form First Union At A National Book Store Chain.” United Food & Commercial Workers Union News, Dec. 21, 2021, https://www.wnylabortoday.com/news/2021/12/21/organizing-news-from-across-the-u.s.a./i-am-so-excited-to-unionize-because-i-know-it-will-help-us-

“Minnesota Bookstore Workers United” Facebook, 
https://www.facebook.com/MNBookstoreWorkersUnited/.

“Minnesota Bookstore Workers Join Our Union Family.” UFCW, 

UFCW Local 663. “Minnesota bookstore workers win another NLRB union election, securing fourth store at national chain Half Price Books.” UFCW, 


“Ready Rita’s - Our Story” Ready Rita, 

“Workers For Half Price Books Union @HPBUUnionMN” X (Twitter), 
https://mobile.twitter.com/HPBUUnionMN.

X (Twitter) Post. Oct. 19, 2021 - Northtown HPB workers also came out as publicly part of the unionization effort as well. Making the number of stores part of the campaign three: Roseville, St. Paul, and Northtown. All three are carrying forward as part of the campaign and election. See the twitter page for more details. URL to specific twitter post and picture: https://twitter.com/HPBUUnionMN/status/1450501749618397191.