

“ I don't have to shut off my politics or ethics when I clock in.”

— BENNETT JOHNSON,
Tattersall Distillery

I'm a lead bartender at the Tattersall Distillery Cocktail Room in Minneapolis. The distillery makes all-natural craft spirits including whiskey, rum, bourbon, gin and brandy. I joined the staff of Tattersall before it even opened. Even though the company started only 5 years ago, our products are already sold in 25 states.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the distillery used its equipment to produce over 105,000 gallons of hand sanitizer and donated proceeds from its sale to fight hunger. I am really proud of that.

At the same time, the Covid pandemic made me and a lot of my co-workers realize we needed a union to protect our health and our jobs.

When the cocktail room was shut down because of Covid, I would stop by the company office to catch up. I asked a lot of questions about safety plans for re-opening because I was very concerned. Management sent out emails to the staff about the re-opening menu and the work schedule, but was dismissive about safety issues, casually telling me, "we'll figure it out."

When the workers discussed safety fears among ourselves, we developed a commitment to protect our health as a united group. We reviewed the company's "Covid-19 preparedness plan," and found it inadequate, so we requested that our issues be addressed at an upcoming all-staff meeting. Our message was simple: we all want to come back to work, SAFELY.

We were shocked when management responded by canceling the meeting and letting us know they would be interviewing each of us individually. This was followed by statements that they would be interviewing new people to fill some of the jobs. We felt that our jobs were not secure.

We started sharing with each other the longer-term issues we had tolerated at work over the years, including the need for a more racially diverse staff, and management's overall failure to communicate with us about decisions that affected our daily work. Some managers had responded to our requests for change in the past by reminding us we could always go work somewhere else.

Through a friend, we contacted a leader of UNITE HERE. We asked him a lot of questions and then quickly decided to go forward and form a union. We signed up a large majority fast, informed management at a group meeting, and filed for an election.

Tattersall management used its social media to criticize our decision to organize. That backfired badly because so many of our customers took our side and publicly expressed their anger at the company.

Leading up to the Union election, managers tried to single me out and put pressure on me. It wasn't pleasant. We didn't bend, and the final vote was 87% yes for the Union! Now that we are represented, management can't just replace us, and we have a voice to enforce health and safety when our restaurant reopens.

Since we successfully organized, there's been a wave of workers at several other restaurants and bars nearby who have been inspired to form unions, and at least two have already won union rights.

As we began the organizing at Tattersall, George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis police on May 25. Mass protests began, and myself and many of my co-workers joined the movement in the streets. We rallied and marched, and provided mutual aid like picking up trash and doing deliveries. For me, the combination of these factors made me realize that my job and my activism outside of work are intertwined. Companies want us to "leave it at the door" for the good of the brand, but by being active in my union, I don't have to shut off my politics or ethics when I clock in. I've decided not to separate these things ever again.



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