DNAinfo

April 18th, 2012

Bloomingdale's Workers Rally for New Contract

By Amy Zimmer, DNAinfo News Editor

UPPER EAST SIDE — Scores of Bloomingdale's workers staged a rally Wednesday to highlight their plight for a new contract.

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Local 3, the union representing 2,000 workers at the Bloomie's flagship on East 59th Street, is in negotiations with the company for a new four-year contract to take effect once the current contract expires on May 1.

Workers want a general wage increase, profit sharing, negotiable commission rates and increased night premium pay, among other demands, according to the union. Bloomingdale's, on the other hand, is offering a seven-year contract with such cuts as its 9 percent contribution to workers' health and benefits plans, union officials said.

The store also wants a new rating system on productivity and professional conduct, RWDSU Local 3's president Cassandra Berrocal said.

"We deserve dignity and respect on the job," she said. "Is it unreasonable when [Bloomingdale's] makes it reputation and profits on the backs of its workers, we should be compensated?"

The department store's parent company, Macy's, saw a 5.6 increase in sales last year — a third straight year of increased sales, with luxury at Bloomie's flagship doing well, according to reports. Macy’s CEO Terry Lundgren saw a 23 percent jump in his compensation package, to $14.5 million in 2011.

"All we want is a fair contract," said Damaris Morales, 46, who has been as a saleswoman at the store for 15 years, starting in intimate apparel and now in denim. She earns $9.10 an hour with 6 percent commission (that she gets only if she meets a certain sales quota).

"You're supposed to be a salesperson, but we do so much more. We clean. We stock. We're therapists for the customers," she said, noting that her customers share with her intimate details of their sex lives, dating foibles and extramarital affairs.

"You have fun here, you just wish you were appreciated," she said.

She and others said the work environment has become more difficult as other demands have increased such as having to sign customers up for new accounts and calling regular clients to make sales.

"There is a limit to what a sales associate can do," said Clara Byrne, a Bloomingdale's saleswoman for 23 years, who works in women's coats and swimwear where she earns 4.5 percent on commission. "We're making 40 to 50 calls a day for every one sale."

Byrne complained that the store is now putting coats on various floors, cutting into her commission, and for the first time ever, she recently earned a paycheck of $0 because she didn't meet her sales goals.

"The company is doing well, but it's not showing in our pockets," Byrne said.

She also noted that the stock room, with its high shelves and stacks of boxes, is on the other side of the building from where she works, saying, "It's taking a toll on our bodies."

Byrne, Morales and others said store policies of accepting returns — even on damaged goods — might be a boon to shoppers but it eats away at workers' paychecks, who lose commission on those sales.

In her department, Morales said, returns are rampant especially for True Religion jeans, since many customers wear them for a weekend and then bring them back, she said.

"We call it 'rent-a-jean,'" Morales said.

A Bloomingdale's spokeswoman said the company did not discuss internal negotiations with the press but the store was negotiating in "good faith" and hoped "to have a goal of a contract that's fair and equitable to both parties."