ABORTION

Reproductive Rights Specialist Fired Hours After Company's Successful Union Election: 'It Was Brutal'

Sam Heyne talked to Jezebel about being fired from the nation's leading abortion rights research group, hours after she helped her colleagues unionize.

By Caitlin Cruz | 7/13/22 9:25PM | Comments (7)

Photo: L Courtesy of GEU, Right Courtesy of Sam Heyne

Sam Heyne was celebrating the victory everyone organizing a union drive at their workplace craves: Guttmacher Employees United overwhelmingly voted in favor of unionizing on Tuesday morning.

Within two hours, Heyne was fired from the prominent reproductive rights research organization.

Heyne finished rejoicing with her colleagues over a lunchtime Zoom and was preparing to return to her job duties as a learning and development specialist at the world's leading abortion healthcare research firm on Tuesday afternoon when she got an "out-of-the-blue" Microsoft Teams invitation. On the call was Heyne's direct boss, human resource director Lisa Blain, as well as Guttmacher's Vice President for Finance & Administration, Maureen Burnley.

Heyne was worried because of the last-minute nature of the call, just after the union victory—plus, prior to the call, she had advocated for an employee who Heyne thought wasn't getting equitable performance evaluations. That advocacy was immediately brought up on the call.

"Immediately noticing that it was investigatory in nature, I said, 'Can we please pause this meeting? I would like to exercise my Weingarten rights and have a union representative with me in this meeting. Is it all right if we pause and continue this meeting when I have a union representative with me?'" Heyne told Jezebel in a phone interview. "And they said, 'Yeah, that's fine, but we would like you to know that you are terminated effective today.'"

When Heyne asked why, "They said, 'Well, we'll talk about that when you have your union rep with you,'" she told Jezebel. "[They] ended the call and then immediately locked me out of my computer. They took over my screen, shut everything down, and that was it."

Heyne added: "It was brutal."

Guttmacher, in a statement to Jezebel, disputed that Heyne's firing was related to her organizing efforts. "We categorically deny the allegation of retaliation. This personnel decision has nothing whatsoever to do with the Union election. Guttmacher management has and will continue to respect our employees' labor rights–we very deliberately did not campaign against union efforts, and did not interfere with the process or tried to change its outcome. We are committed to be responsive and respectful to the organizers, and are looking forward to negotiate the best contract possible for our staff."

Guttmacher also confirmed its continued employment of Jackson Lewis PC, a law firm best known for its union-busting tactics.

Word of Heyne's termination spread quickly through reproductive advocacy arena. Workers from clinics and nonprofits had closely followed Guttmacher's union drive. The organization is the world's leading think tank on reproductive healthcare; its research makes accurate writing about abortion and reproductive healthcare possible. But it's recently been plagued by accusations of racism and called a "toxic" work environment.

Immediately, OPEIU Local 153 (Guttmacher's union home) started an email campaign to reinstate Heyne. As of 3:35 pm E.T., 544 emails had been sent from the public in support of Heyne to President and CEO Dr. Herminia Palacio.

After the union's victory was publicized, Palacio tweeted congratulations to the staff. "On behalf of our leadership team, we congratulate staff and look forward to a collaborative and successful relationship. Onward!" she wrote.

"I saw the statement," Heyne told me. "I think that Guttmacher leadership should be true to the to the statements that they're putting out. If you want to work with the union and staff in a productive and collaborative manner, then stop union busting and give me my job back," Heyne said.

Guttmacher was "quite literally a dream job for me," Heyne said, but a culture of retaliation took away "the opportunity of a lifetime" to support the people advancing reproductive healthcare research.

On Wednesday, Heyne finally received critical information about her termination, including the date her health insurance would expire and when her last paycheck would be. "That's the only communication that I received," she told Jezebel.

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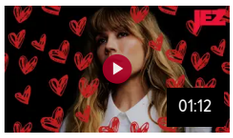

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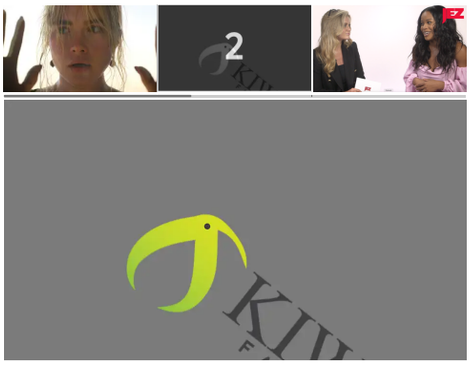

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