

Cooling off for union, Farmer Joe's

• Letter signed by Oakland leaders spurred decision to halt rallies

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The local United Food and Commercial Workers union has called a cooling-off period with their rallies at Farmer Joe's, said union political director Tony Alexander.

Farmer Joe's store owners Joe and Diana Tam and the union have been locked in a seven-month battle over how to proceed with a unionization vote with its employees.

The union's decision Wednesday was the result of a letter that union president Ronald Lind received on Tuesday from local political leaders, including Mayor Ron Dellums, Assemblyman Sandre Swanson, D-Oakland, and City Councilwoman Jean Quan, who asked the union to work with the Tams toward a settlement.

Paul Rose, spokesman for Mayor Ron Dellums, said the mayor supports small businesses as well as the right of workers to organize.

"There should be a cooling-off period to ensure that all parties are working towards an atmosphere where negotiations can be constructive," Rose said.

Richard Cowan, chief of staff from Quan's office, said he hopes "the union uses the cooling-off period to win community support. It's a period for calmness to be re-established."

In a statement, the union said attempts to unionize stores that serve ethnic communities, including Farmer Joe's and Super Mercado Market, have failed because of its common "confrontational approach."

The union will employ a new strategy to convince stores that a partnership would be of mutual interest to the owners, employees and the community. There will be no picketing, boycotting or leafletting at the Fruitvale Avenue store during the cooling-off period.

The Tams' problems with the union began earlier this year when some former employees alleged the store owners fired them because of their unionization efforts. The Tams said the employees were fired for just cause unrelated to union activities.

The union has been pushing for a card-check agreement, which the Tams oppose. They said the agreement forces them to disclose private employee information. Diana Tam said she wants the National Labor Relations Board to conduct the secret ballot election to allow her employees to decide and not be pressured by the union. She has petitioned the board for the vote.

"We respect and value our employees," she said. "We will always honor their decisions."

Last month, the Tams filed a complaint against the union with the National Labor Relations Board, charging it with illegal picketing. They contended that the union has picketed more than 30 days without petitioning the NLRB to become a collective bargaining representative for the stores' employees.

"The union has been picketing and boycotting to force us to unionize," said Diana Tam.

The case was scheduled for a hearing before the NLRB but the union agreed on a settlement to not picket.

"We agreed to something we weren't doing anyway," said union spokesman Mike Henneberry. "We're not picketing, we're leafletting."

Since late January, union supporters rallied every Friday afternoon at the Tams' Fruitvale Avenue store. The union increased its efforts to five days a week and called for boycotts.

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