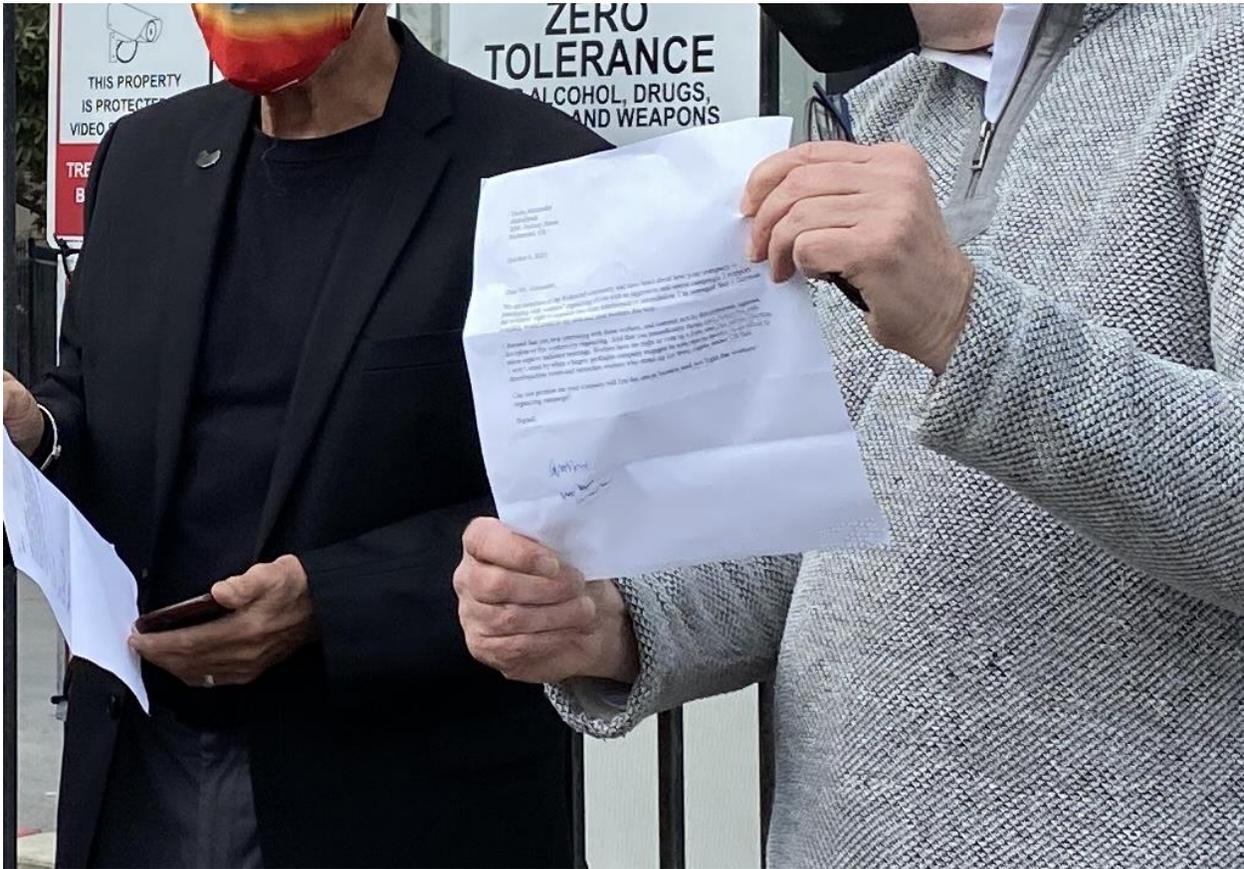


Richmond Confidential



Richmond's HelloFresh workers get community support in union effort

[Junyao Yang](#) on October 19, 2021

Down the stark road along Factory Street stands the 100,000-square-foot HelloFresh distribution center, where big rigs come in and out.

More than 900 people work there, most of them on assembly lines, preparing and packing the food kits that will later be loaded onto rigs and arrive at the dinner tables of millions of HelloFresh subscribers. Last year, the largest single COVID-19 outbreak in Contra Costa County occurred at the plant, with 171 cases recorded and one death, according to [a Bay Area News Group analysis](#) of state data.

Those workers want to unionize to make their jobs safer and more sustainable and last month, filed a petition with hospitality union UNITE HERE to the National Labor Relations Board. The union election will take place on Nov. 18.

Richmond City Council will vote Tuesday night on a resolution to support HelloFresh warehouse workers and to draft a letter to HelloFresh’s CEO, saying workers should be able to unionize “without retaliation or interference from management or outside agencies.”

In an email to Richmond Confidential, Kim Kornfeld, a HelloFresh spokesperson, said, “HelloFresh firmly respects each employee’s right to choose or refuse to be represented by a union. We look out for our employees and will continue doing so to ensure they are treated fairly and respectfully.”

The union push prompted the company to hire Kulture Consulting in September. HelloFresh is paying each consultant more than \$3,500 a day, plus expenses, to present “educational information” and engage in one-on-one discussions with employees, a report released by the Labor Department shows. The report doesn’t say how many consultants HelloFresh has hired.

“Our goal has been and will continue to be to present the facts, so our employees can make informed decisions,” Kornfeld said. “To promote further education and create an open dialogue, we have organized sessions facilitated by experienced professionals so that our employees can educate themselves fully in order to make the best decisions for themselves.”

Form LM-20 (2003)

<p>9. Check the appropriate box(es) to indicate whether an object of the activities undertaken is directly or indirectly:</p> <p>a. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> To persuade employees to exercise or not to exercise, or persuade employees as to the manner of exercising, the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.</p> <p>b. <input type="checkbox"/> To supply an employer with information concerning the activities of employees or a labor organization in connection with a labor dispute involving such employer, except information for use solely in conjunction with an administrative or arbitral proceeding or a criminal or civil judicial proceeding.</p>	
<p>10. Terms and conditions. (Explain in detail; see instructions. Written agreements must be attached.):</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Written Agreement/Arrangement Oral agreement made through Kulture Consulting, \$3,500 per day, per consultant, plus actual and reasonable expenses. No formal agreement relative to duration or amount of hours to be performed.</p>	
<p>Specific Activities to be performed</p> <p>Activity 1</p>	
<p>11. For each activity, separately list in detail the information required. (See instructions.)</p> <p>a. Nature of activity: Presented educational information to employees regarding union card-signing tactics, union organizing tactics, Section Seven rights under the National Labor Relations Act, the mail voting process and an overview of collective bargaining. Engaged in one-on-one discussions with employees to share information and answer questions.</p>	
<p>11.b. Period during which activities performed: Various dates beginning 9/06/2021</p>	<p>11.c. Extent of performance: Ongoing</p>

The company is employing classic tactics, said Ken Jacobs, chair of the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California, Berkeley.

[Union membership has gradually declined](#) in recent decades, Jacobs noted. In the late 1950s, over a third of private sector workers were in unions and now that is down to only a small fraction, he said.

Workers' bargaining power is declining. And as technology has improved productivity, employers — not workers — have benefitted more, he said. However, interest in unions are the highest that Jacobs has seen in years.

"The conditions are ripe right now for greater worker organizing," he said.

A UNITE HERE survey of about one-quarter of the HelloFresh Richmond workers in September showed an average hourly wage of \$18.27. An overwhelming majority of those surveyed said they worried about paying the rent or mortgage in the past year. A third said they had been injured at work.

"There is a lot of pressure on you to give more than you can do," Karen Figueroa, who had worked for the company off and on until last year, said in Spanish.

The repetitive work is hard on people's bodies, and it has become harder because of the demand during the pandemic.

According to HelloFresh's 2020 Annual Report, it received nearly 39 million orders and delivered 278 million meals in the United States last year, doubling both orders and meals from 2019. Revenue for the company, which is based in Germany, rose 102% to 2 billion euros in its U.S. market alone.

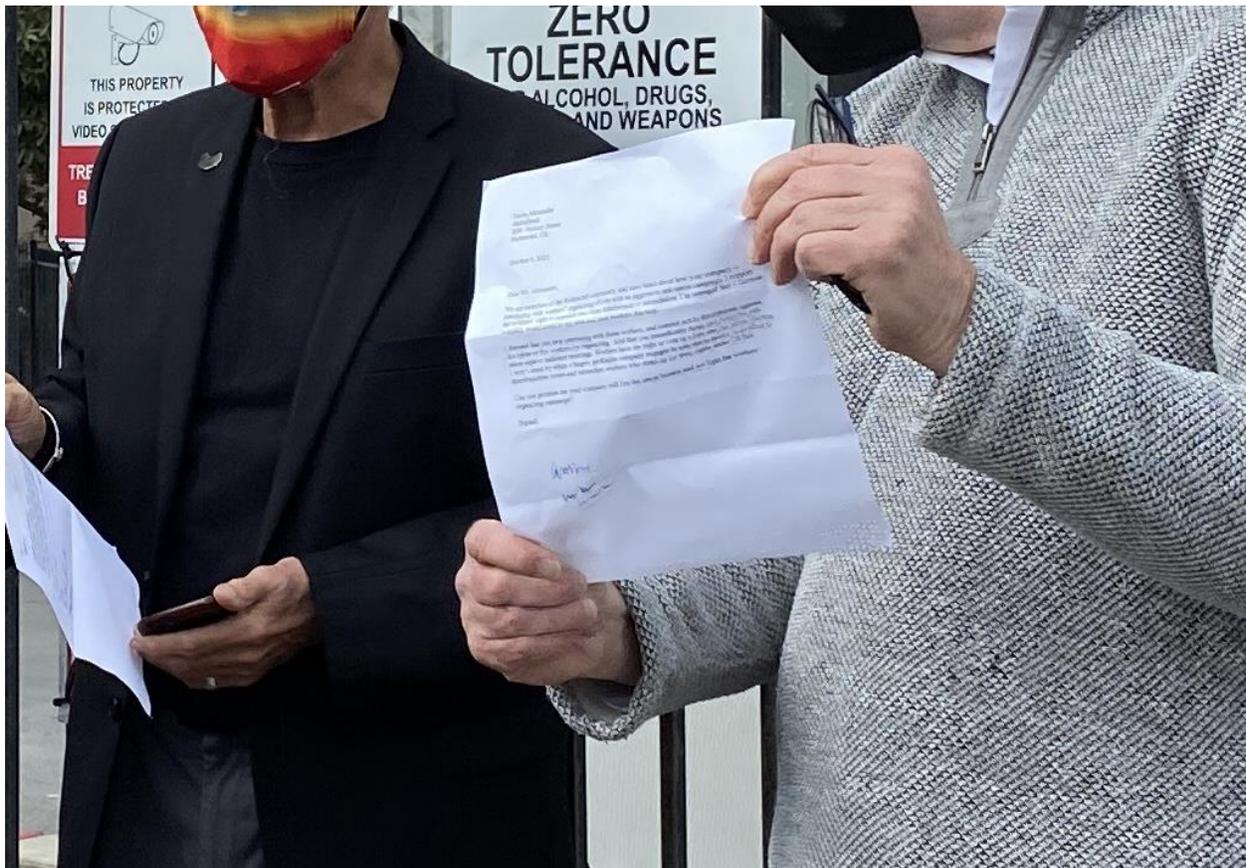
"Workers made sure the company succeeded during this incredible growth moment for it," said Tiffany Ten Eyck, a UNITE HERE spokesperson who's been working closely with workers in Richmond. "They just want to feel like they're part of the growth the company's having."

Workers want stronger safety protocols, better protections around injuries and repetitive motion strains, higher wages and better health benefits, Ten Eyck said.

After the coronavirus outbreak, [HelloFresh was fined \\$8,995](#) by the state for protocol violations, including inadequately enforcing face-covering rules and failing to provide hand-washing facilities or maintain a physical distance in the workplace and breakroom, records show.

Kornfeld said the company has addressed those issues. She added that it also worked with the state and Contra Costa County Health Services to offer thousands of free coronavirus tests. That testing uncovered cases in some people who had no symptoms, leading to the higher case count, she said.

A couple weeks ago, about 20 people from the Richmond community gathered outside the HelloFresh warehouse in support of workers. Each had hand-signed a letter to Darin Alexander, director of operations, demanding the company stop interfering with the union campaign.



Community members bring letters to HelloFresh, supporting workers' right to organize. (Junyao Yang)

“Many of the workers at HelloFresh are immigrants who come to this country wanting to improve their lives, support their families, and don’t want to do anything to hurt that chance,” said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who joined the delegation. “We want workers to feel safe, that they can talk about this issue and vote on this issue without fear for their jobs.”

A worker who was on his way home shouted to the delegation: "We need a union! We need it now!" A few cars honked in support as they drove past.

In solidarity with the union effort, Dead Meat, a horror movie channel with 5 million Youtube followers, says it will pull all HelloFresh ads from its podcast.

Hundreds of people on Twitter and TikTok have criticized HelloFresh for hampering the union campaign, with some saying they have canceled their subscription to the meal-kit service. And more than 200,000 people have signed the petition hosted by UNITE HERE to call on HelloFresh to pull back on the consultants.

Jessica De La Torre contributed to this story.

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