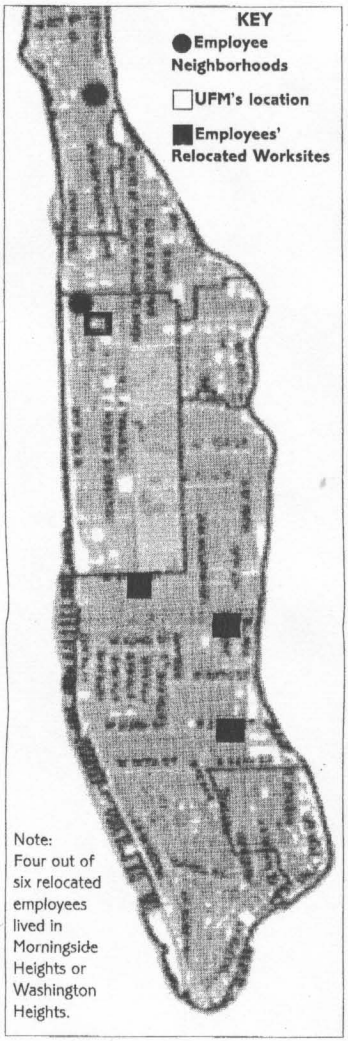
Morton Williams Disappoints Employees, Satisfies Customers

BY CHASE BEHRINGER

José Jiménez, 63, worked at University Food Market for 37 years as the store manager. When Morton Williams bought UFM in October, it demoted him and cut his salary by more than 50 percent. He was later transferred to the 57th Street store and replaced by an existing employee. When asked why he was transferred, Morton Williams Vice President Avi Kaner said that Jiménez's "experience" would be welcomed at 57th Street, one of their busiest stores.

But on his first day on the job at the 57th Street store Jiménez was thrown an apron from the dirty laundry and told to "clean the basement" for an upcoming inspection. He was given a mop, a bucket, and a scraper. After Jiménez complained that the job was too much for one old man, he was treated poorly and subsequently quit.

Since Morton Williams Associated Market purchased UFM, 23 of the original 45 employees have left. The store claims it is trying to improve the shopping experience for Morningside residents, but many residents are increasingly vocal in their opposition to Morton Williams' treatment of its employees.



Note: Four out of six relocated employees lived in Morningside Heights or Washington Heights.

To its credit, the company has heavily renovated the store, turning the small family market into an attractive and profitable shopping center. Morton Williams has invested nearly $2 million in the store, replacing produce shelves and widening aisles. However, students and community members must decide whether these material upgrades are worth 22 jobs.

Morton Williams, while not obligated to keep the UFM staff, gave former owner Charlie Pastor the impression that they would. Once Morton Williams took over, the employees were evaluated on a case-by-case basis. In some instances, they received 20 to 50 percent pay cuts and a reduction of hours, in exchange for free health care and future union benefits. However, such benefits came too late for those forced to leave the store.

FORMER UFM/MORTON WILLIAMS EMPLOYEES

NAME	POSITION	SENIORITY	TRANSFER TO BRANCH
JOSE JIMENEZ	Night Manager	37 Years	57th Street
TINA PAULINO	Bookkeeper	25 Years	23rd Street
ANTHONY AMEZQUITA	Day Manager	16 Years	57th Street
ANDREA BRYANT	Dairy Manager	18 Years	48th Street
WILLIAMS "POP" GOGGINS	Floor Man	16 Years	57th Street
JOHN BRICE	Deli Man		57th Street

For many employees, the restructuring was difficult. Store workers claim they were told by the new management "not to complain to customers" about any changes, a statement the company denies. Morton Williams's response to troublesome employees was classic: promote some, move others to another of its stores. The company made strategic transfers; the oldest employees were moved downtown, away from Morningside Heights and far from home.

Such was the case with William Goggins, a man known to many customers as "Pop." After working at UFM for 18 years, he watched his salary dwindle from $677, to $355, to $255 dollars per week. He is currently on unemployment, he said, "because it pays better," and is considering filing a lawsuit against Morton Williams.

The leftover UFM staff depended on people like Jiménez and Goggins to voice their growing concerns. As the store was being renovated during winter break, temperatures inside were in the teens. Eventually, Morton Williams purchased space heaters that were soon removed for technical reasons. While Morton Williams claims that it kept the store open during renovation as a favor to the community, it should have shut it down rather than endanger its employees. Article 14 of the New York State Labor Law prohibits subjecting workers to unreasonable temperatures.

During the renovation period, police also discovered employees locked in the store, a dispatch officer and two employees confirmed. Such behavior constitutes a violation of the New York Health and Safety Code. When confronted with this information, Kaner said that he was unaware of the incident, but added that "it didn't matter" because the store is now open 24 hours.

Additionally, there were allegations of racist management. Current staff members described working with one manager who openly spoke about his dislike for "niggers."

So far these issues have not been brought to the attention of the local union. Community members, aware of the problems, have written and called the union to complain, but none of the remaining employees, who fear losing their jobs, have voiced their concerns to the union. Executive Vice President of Local 338 Murray Morrissey said of the concerns for Morton Williams employees, "Our job is to represent the individual and even within our limited capacity, we've tried our best. If there was something like [what has been alleged] happening, we wouldn't tolerate it."

Do you guys at the *Columbia Spectator* go to all the stores up and down Broadway? Do you ask *them* about their employee relations?

—Morton Williams VP Avi Kaner in a Jan. 31 phone call

Most of the store's former employees, many of whom live in the Morningside Heights, Harlem and Washington Heights neighborhoods, were transferred to inconveniently located Morton Williams locations in the city, after which many of them left the company. Morton Williams has 10 stores in Manhattan and the Bronx, and moving employees is a "common" practice, Kaner said. Between November and January, Morton Williams transferred the day manager, night manager and senior floor man from its 116th Street store to another location on 57th and Broadway. As one former staff member explained, "First they reduce your pay, then your hours. And sooner or later they'll ship you away." With hesitation he added, "We all know what they're doing."

In response to the accusations brought against them, Morton Williams reminds critics of its favorable reputation. In the past decade the company has matured from a small chain of produce stores into a collection of profitable grocery markets. Industry publications like *Progressive Grocer*, in addition to the Boy Scouts of America and other charity groups, have recognized the store. Despite this past praise, Morton Williams has been unable to avoid difficulties with its newest branch.

No one is disputing that Morton Williams takes care of its customers—that's just the problem. Morton Williams has ignored and mistreated its employees, and in the process aggravated the very customers it tries so hard to please. Morningside Heights residents have longstanding relationships with the former employees of UFM, and moving them across town is not going to change that. Morton Williams should change its labor practices or the Morningside community should find a new place to shop.

The author is a Columbia College sophomore and deputy editorial page editor for Spectator.