



Company and union officials embrace drivers as they are sent out on their first beer deliveries from Hartford Distributors, Inc. on Aug. 11, 2010. Employees at Hartford Distributors, Inc. are back to work this morning in Manchester at the scene of last week's deadly rampage that left nine people dead. Company employees and officials paused for a moment of silence at 7am this morning. (Patrick Raycraft, Hartford Courant / August 11, 2010)

## A Strong Show Of Union Solidarity

### Union Solidarity In Full View

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A convoy of beer trucks with horns blaring and Teamsters drivers flashing the thumbs up would not normally bring a lump to the throat and a tear to the eye. Then again, the scene at Hartford Distributors Inc. on Wednesday morning was not just another day at the warehouse.



It was a remarkable moment of unity, all the more so because it was one of three memorable events happening at the same time around Connecticut that galvanized union workers.

They did exactly what they had talked about at HDI — gathered together, said a few words, bowed their heads, marched into the building as one. More than 100 workers entered the space, suspended for an instant between their painful roles as survivors of last week's mass killing and their livelihoods as professionals in the beverage industry.

"One of our drivers said, 'All right, let's get to work,'" said sales manager Brett Hollander, whose family owns the Manchester-based Budweiser wholesaler. "And that was it."

The "it" was a return to work and much more. It was a showing of solidarity at its best — not in opposition to management but rather in support of uplifting teamwork. When the trucks rolled out at 8:55 a.m. with a driveway sendoff from company and union officials, it was a punctuation mark that said life may never be the same, but we will not fall victim to evil.

A few miles away in Hartford, members of the New England Health Care Workers, District 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, arrived triumphantly to their headquarters after a night of reveling. With 20,000 members statewide, SEIU, and especially District 1199, could rightly claim credit for catapulting Dan Malloy to a come-from-behind win for the Democratic nomination for governor.

"We're a little tired but feeling good," said 1199 vice president Linda Vannoni, who recounted how she texted everyone on her cellphone Tuesday — one of many little acts that led to victory for Malloy, the favored SEIU candidate. Political director Jennifer Smith and communications director Deborah Chernoff described the union's old-fashioned political drive, motivated by Malloy's history of support for health care workers.

As the SEIU workers reflected, hundreds of members and friends of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union gathered in New Canaan for the funeral of their leader, Brian Petronella, who died suddenly last week at 54. Many of the state's political elite turned out to show respect for one of Connecticut's storied labor organizers.

Petronella's and the UFCW's recent victory for bartenders at Foxwoods was much-discussed.

Three scenes. Together, they sent a message that organized labor remains a strong presence even at a time when union influence is said to be waning. More broadly, the images Wednesday show that when working people come together — whether in a union or not — they are a social and economic force beyond what most of us imagine.

That is nowhere more true than at Hartford Distributors, a company that has thrived while paying drivers and warehouse staff the top rates and benefits in the business. It was palpable even to us in the cynical, skeptical media as we watched the return ceremony around a brick sign on the front lawn of the property on Chapel Road.

And it's what driver John Kozyra said he felt at that moment. "No one was off to the sides," he said. "We're a group."

And that is why the office staff at the company overwhelmingly turned down the company's gesture of setting up a remote location for them to do their jobs, for a transition period. "This is where we call home. I've been coming here for 30-some years," said Linda Davidson, who works in sales administration at HDI.

In time, union battles will rage on, elections will grow ugly over union issues and labor leaders will fight each other. For now, at least, we've seen the best of what worker solidarity can mean.