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TED ANIKILDE/The Globe and Mail

Ex-employee fights for union at Magna

Canadian auto parts maker says charter makes union unnecessary

DAWN WALTON
The Globe and Mail

The man who was once responsible for ironing out employee complaints at Magna International Inc. is campaigning for the company's 54,000 workers and 164 manufacturing divisions to get a union.

Gary Speranzini, 54, spent yesterday handing out flyers — which outline his support of unionization at Magna — to employees at the company's Integram seating plant near Windsor, Ont.

"It's just a one-man show right now," said Mr. Speranzini, who no longer works for the auto parts giant and isn't being backed by a labour group.

"They need an organization [such as a union]. I think I'm in a position to say that to them with some insight that is not too common because of the job I held there," he said.

Mr. Speranzini was the senior investigator and general manager of Magna's employee hot-line, a program outlined in Magna's employee charter. Aurora, Ont.-based

Magna has argued that the charter is part of a system of employee relations mechanisms that make unions unnecessary for workers at the company.

The charter includes a guarantee of fair treatment free from discrimination and a hot line to anonymously register complaints.

Mr. Speranzini left Magna in December, and a confidentiality agreement with Magna prohibits him from talking about his job in detail. His main duties were to investigate complaints, find remedies and try to negotiate settlements with plant managers at each factory.

"But the hot-line had no enforcement mechanism. So if the general manager didn't accept the findings, it just went into limbo," Mr. Speranzini said.

Why is he fighting for something at a company he no longer works for? "I just feel strongly enough about it," he said. "My whole career has been spent working for people who are ordinary citizens with complaints."

Mr. Speranzini has previously

worked for the Ontario Human Rights Commission and Ontario's Ombudsman's office before giving up life in the public sector to join Magna in 1997.

An Integram employee who also served on the plants fairness committee supported Mr. Speranzini's efforts. "I went from a company supporter to a union organizer," said the employee, who asked not to be identified.

Workers want health care coverage and pensions, not profit sharing tied to stock price performance, the employee explained.

A Magna spokesperson could not be reached for comment.

The Canadian Auto Workers union launched a certification drive at the Integram plant last fall, but Magna has challenged the vote with the Ontario Labour Relations Board, which will hold a third round of hearings into the case in May.

The union claimed victory in October after a vote at the plant, but challenged a number of votes. Magna wants the unionization vote thrown out, saying it was influenced by union intimidation.