

Cautious growth of Stevens' boycott

By Dan Marschall
Staff Writer

What is it like to work for J.P. Stevens, the second largest textile company in the United States? "It's like being on the chain gang...except no guns. Just pressure. Pressure all the time," says Mildren Whitley, a Stevens' worker in Roanoke Rapids, N.C.

After 26 years at Stevens Whitley had a radical mastectomy and asked to be placed on a lighter job. "My supervisor told me that I could go ask the welfare for help. He informed me that I could either run the job no matter what it did to me, I could quit, or else he would fire me," she says. "All they want is your blood and then they let you go."

Whitley's story is not unique. She and other Stevens' employees describe company practices in *Testimony: Justice vs. J.P. Stevens*, a 22-minute color film produced by the Citizen's Committee for Justice for J.P. Stevens Workers. It is currently touring the country as part of a nationwide consumer boycott of Stevens' products. (ITT, Nov. 29, 1976.)

Testimony is a moving, personalized documentary about the shocking working conditions in Stevens' facilities and the determination of its workers—young and old, black and white—to unionize. Designed as an educational/organizing resource for the boycott, the film is mainly set in Roanoke Rapids, where 3,500 workers voted in 1974 for representation by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers union (ACTWU).

Individual testimonies.

The backbone of the film is the individual testimonials of Stevens' workers about safety conditions, racial discrimination, the health hazards of cotton dust and the attempts by Stevens to defeat the union with a barrage of often-illegal tactics.

Maurine Hedgepeth, a Stevens worker with three children, testifies about being illegally fired for "talkin' union." She began work in the mills in 1957. After appearing before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in 1964, she went on pregnancy leave. "On Christmas Eve they fired my husband, after him bein' a loom fixer for 25 years," she explains. "In January, when my leave was up, they wouldn't give me my job back. They told us if any of us was goin' to get any work we would have to leave town to do it, because nobody would hire us."

"Stevens doesn't just fire you. They fire your whole family. It took four years and 21 days before I got my job back. I had to go all the way up through the courts."

Through a string of interviews the film successfully conveys the "raw courage" and "bravery" shown by Stevens workers. (After three years of negotiations the company refuses to agree to a contract in Roanoke Rapids.)

It emphasizes the unity of interests between black and white workers. In one scene a cluster of workers talk about company efforts to foster racial antagonisms. "Before the election they tried to pit the blacks against the whites and the whites against the blacks anyway they could," says a white woman. "But they were just trying to get the white people not to join the union. It didn't work."

Cautious tactics.

The film also reflects the boycott's cautious tactics and reliance on moral persuasion to convince people not to buy Stevens' goods. It highlights respected community leaders—clergymen, a college professor, attorneys—discussing blacklisting, the impact of low unionization on Southern living conditions and other issues. The union maintains a low profile throughout, since the conflict is portrayed as a "struggle for justice," a fight for basic American rights rather than a labor/management confrontation.



The boycott is unfolding in several stages. The first, to establish the boycott's legitimacy, is now underway.

While the union authorized the boycott a year ago, it has only gotten rolling in the last six months. It is part of a 10-year, well financed campaign to pressure J.P. Stevens, which the union sees as key to organizing the textile industry and eventually the entire South. The union has hired 40 full-time organizers, opened offices in 27 cities, and intends to pour \$1.5 million per year into the campaign. Funds have also been donated by the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers and the Teamsters.

Only stage one.

The boycott is unfolding in several stages. The first phase, which is apparently intended to establish its legitimacy, is primarily educational. This includes sporadic leafletting in large cities, the formation of big-name citizen's committees, wide distribution of the film, support statements from other unions and civil rights groups, and legal suits.

The boycott's field staff is clearly subordinate to the union's administration. All activities are cleared through the ACTWU's legal department, which has cautiously interpreted recent NLRB and Supreme Court rulings concerning secondary boycotts. Union lawyers have instructed staffers to do their leafletting of retail stores more than a block away, for example.

"There is some frustration about having to filter everything through the legal offices," comments Mike Schippani, New England boycott director. "But Stevens is a powerful multinational corporation. They're watching very closely for any mistakes the union makes. And they're ready to jump down our throats with law suits."

Schippani speculates that the NLRB will become more receptive to union arguments as it is inundated by legal complaints against Stevens. In April the ACTWU filed four new charges of illegal activities and requested a "corporate-wide

remedy" that could consist of the company being forced to recognize the union at all of its 85 plants.

The union has slated six areas—Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh and upstate New York—for "advanced activity," including major newspaper ads and visits to department stores by noted community leaders.

More creative activities.

There are pressures for more creative mass activities at various levels of the campaign. Campus organizing, largely modeled on the anti-war movement, has included teach-ins, demonstrations and pressure on university administrators to cut institutional ties with Stevens.

Campus support groups have organized demonstrations at Princeton, Dickinson and Stanford universities. At Stanford, which owns 3,000 shares of Stevens stock, students gathered 1,600 signatures on a petition demanding that the university vote for proposals to impel Stevens to release information on equal employment and labor policies. When university representatives decided to abstain from one vote, 50 protesters occupied the administration building for several hours.

In Detroit demonstrators leafletted inside a department store during an appearance by Suzanne Pleshette, an actress on the *Bob Newhart Show*. Pleshette has toured the country for Stevens after the company agreed to market her specially-designed line of bed linens. After the Detroit action she cancelled appearances in several cities and has reportedly decided to drop the promotional efforts altogether.

The union is also pressuring financial institutions that deal with and support Stevens. In April boycott supporters infiltrated the annual meeting of the Manufacturers Hanover Corp. and argued that James D. Finley, Stevens' chairman, should not be a member of Manufacturers' board of directors. "People like Mr. Finley have no place on our board," com-

mented one executive, referring to the company's embarrassing labor record.

J.P. Stevens Workers Day.

In Boston boycott organizers anticipate demonstrations or other mass activities in the fall. They have designed boycott T-shirts and may organize contingents of supporters to ramble through retail stores to dramatize the campaign.

In April the Boston City Council declared a "J.P. Stevens Workers Day" that featured a luncheon of local notables, a meeting with the governor, and a large rally with music, theater and a screening of *Testimony*.

Despite the gradual pickup in the boycott, some supporters remain disappointed with the union's reluctance to mobilize the rank and file. "Morale is pretty low right now," complains a staff person. "Among full-time field staff, there seems to be a sense of drift, a lack of support for bold activities and little strategic thinking."

The union will apparently push to organize other Stevens plants in the fall, after the boycott is in full swing. They have authorization cards for elections in three Southern Stevens plants. About 26 organizers are already in place around the country.

The boycott has already brought together an impressive array of progressive organizations: labor unions, church groups, civil rights organizations, students and community groups.

"And so a long, grinding battle is now under way," concludes *Testimony*. "It is too late for us that're sick," says Lucy Taylor, a victim of brown lung disease from breathing cotton dust. "But for the people working in the plants, and for our children and grandchildren that're coming on after us, we ask to help us. Boycott J.P. Stevens."

Copies of *Testimony* are available from Harriet Teller, ACTWU, 15 Union Square, New York, NY 10003.

TENANTS

Giving public tenants a voice

The Massachusetts Union now represents nearly 85 percent of the public housing tenants in the state.

By John McDonough
One important reason for poor conditions in the nation's public housing projects is the lack of effective political organization among public housing tenants. Rarely registered, and less frequently organized to lobby for their interests, project tenants faced cutbacks and threats of dissolution during the Republican administration with scarcely a whimper.

In Massachusetts a statewide advocacy organization for public housing tenants is making strides in combatting this inactivity and may present a model for tenants in other states to follow. The Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants, founded in 1971 and now representing nearly 85 percent of public housing tenants in Massachusetts through 55 affiliates, has helped local groups to negotiate with their housing authorities and has presented a unified tenants' voice in dealing with state and federal regulatory agencies.

Some of Massachusetts Union's most successful work has been on the local level where the Union's staff workers, who are themselves public housing tenants, have provided the technical expertise to help tenants create effective organization.

One year ago in Springfield a group of tenants asked the Union for help in reviving their long-dormant city-wide tenants organization. The Union met with tenants, ran a series of workshops on the workings of public housing, and helped to develop a funding proposal for staff and office space under the Massachusetts Department of Public Welfare's Title XX Program.

"Tenants must have their own paid staff if they are ever to act as equals with housing authorities," says Massachusetts Union director John Keane. "Volunteers and a few die-hards aren't enough to keep pressure on authorities to respond to tenants." The Springfield group received funding and is now one of the more active and effective groups in the state.

In the North Shore town of Ipswich, the Massachusetts Union faced a different situation. There the Housing Authority had appointed three persons to be representatives for all tenants. When some other tenants asked the Union for help with a rent problem, discussions soon turned to the lack of any elected tenants group. After an election was held, the Housing Authority refused to recognize the elected group. The Massachusetts Union was able to pressure the state Department of Community Affairs, the regulatory agency for state-aided public housing, to force the Ipswich Authority to recognize the elected tenants organization.

Local efforts such as these have been repeated all across the state. In Cambridge the Union helped a local tenants group to delineate the role of a community board in the dispersal of federal funds. And in Quincy Union staffers organized tenants to attend a hearing on the appointment of a tenant to the local housing authority board of commissioners.

State-wide action.

The Union's most significant achievements have been at the state level. Massachusetts is one of the few states in the country that built its own public housing for low income families. The 30,000 units built under the state program since its inception in 1949 as housing for returning veterans equals the number of units built in Massachusetts under the federal public housing program.

DCA recognizes the Massachusetts Union as the bargaining agent for public

housing tenants in Massachusetts. The Union drew up a model lease for housing authorities in 1973 and convinced DCA to pressure housing authorities that refused to adopt this lease with cutbacks in funding. Last June the state legislature passed a \$50 million bonding authorization for modernization of public housing; local authorities that have not adopted the model lease are ineligible to receive these funds as a direct result of Union lobbying efforts.

The Union has also been successful in stopping efforts to turn back the clock on public housing. In fall 1975 newly appointed DCA Secretary William Flynn tried to water down department policies on enforcement of lease and grievance procedures, tenant participation, eligibility for housing and the amount of income tenants were required to pay in rent. Union activists coordinated a strong public outcry, bringing out over 1,000 persons to a public hearing, and eventually forcing the withdrawal of the proposed revisions.

More recently, the union has convinced DCA and the local office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which regulates the federal programs of housing authorities, to issue a joint policy statement to the effect that one lease may be used for both state and federal projects. Some housing authorities have used the two programs as a way to split tenants groups within individual cities.

National influence.

The Union's influence with HUD has been less extensive, says Keane, "because the Nixon/Ford people were not exactly re-



John Lincoln Durand, former president of Massachusetts Union and present field organizer, addresses a recent convention of the union.

ceptive to what we were doing." "The handles on HUD have always been extremely weak," says Jack Plunkett, founder and first director of Massachusetts Union.

Can the Massachusetts Union model be duplicated? No other state has as much state-built public housing as Massachusetts; and DCA, while often recalcitrant, can at least be pressured on a state-wide level. HUD is more complex and difficult to pressure for change.

Nevertheless, both Keane and Plunkett see value in the establishment of other state tenant organizations across the country. Pressure can be exerted on HUD Area

Offices to assume a more active role and to promulgate and enforce new lease agreements between housing authorities and tenants. New state-wide groups could also be effective in applying pressure on HUD in Washington D.C. in concert with other state groups.

Keane is adamant that tenants must unite in order to affect their living conditions. "The more tenants are organized," he says, "the better off they are. Organization brings more exchange of information, solidarity and the ability to act as a single voice for all tenants."

John McDonough is a Boston-based freelance writer.

CITIES

Forcing the rich to pay up

By Sidney Blumenthal
BOSTON—Tax rebellion has a long tradition here. Residents of the city once donned Indian garb and dumped tea into the harbor to protest King George's levies. Now Massachusetts Fair Share, a working-class citizen action group, is campaigning against property tax delinquents here with some notable success.

After a legal battle Fair Share forced Boston's city treasurer to release the names of delinquent tax-payers. The list reads like a guide to Boston's power elite.

Deputy Mayor Kathy Kane was in arrears for \$6,700 on her Beacon Hill townhouse; her job is to find ways for the city to collect unpaid taxes. Patty Hearst's high-powered attorney, F. Lee Bailey, owed a substantial amount, which he says he won't pay because he is contesting it.

Other tax delinquents included top officers of multinational corporations, slum landlords, Mafia bosses, the owner of the city's taxi fleet, city officials, airlines and insurance companies.

In total, about \$107 million was owed; some of the delinquencies date back 40 years.

To get the list revealed publicly Fair Share obtained an unprecedented ruling from the Massachusetts Secretary of State's office when the group had first asked Boston treasurer James Young for the list he appeared eager to have it pub-

Tax delinquents included a deputy mayor, F. Lee Bailey, corporate leaders, Mafia bosses and other Boston bigwigs.

lished, but had said, "We haven't found a way to do it."

On May 10, the Secretary of State's office issued its decision, which could conceivably lead to similar actions and rulings around the country. Young was then obliged to hand over the names of tardy taxpayers.

The *Boston Globe*, the leading New England daily newspaper, featured the delinquents on its front page for days. Conjecture about who might be exposed in the next day's edition of the paper became a favorite form of higher gossip around town.

Embarrassment on the part of some delinquents was keen. Deputy mayor Kane, for example, promptly paid up what she owed the day after her name appeared in the newspaper.

Fair Share, for its part, has sent to prominent delinquents what the group has labeled "Citizens' Tax Bills." The "Bills" read in part: "The homeowners and tenants of Boston's neighborhoods are shouldering the burden of the taxes you are not paying, and the community schools program and other city programs

are being cut because the city does not have the revenue to pay for them."

Delinquents are notified to have their money into the treasurer's office by a certain date or "we will be forced to consider you deliberately delinquent and will pursue any further actions that may be necessary until you pay the taxes."

Particularly egregious tax-delinquents were placed on Fair Share's "Dirty Dozen" list. These delinquents were the targets of marches organized by the group. Such tactics have sometimes had surprisingly positive results. The New England Mutual Life Insurance Co., for example, which owed the city \$110,852, paid up the day before the noon deadline set for them by Fair Share expired. Fear of mass picketing apparently turned the trick.

Demonstrators also flocked to Boston's Logan Airport to picket the airlines, which owe \$9.3 million in back taxes.

Fair Share community leaders have made a point of stressing the connection between unpaid taxes and city cutbacks. Mayor Kevin White has announced recently that he will terminate the Little City Hall operation in the neighborhoods and after-school program because of budgetary problems. The airlines' payment of their taxes alone would account for enough money to pay for these popular service programs.

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