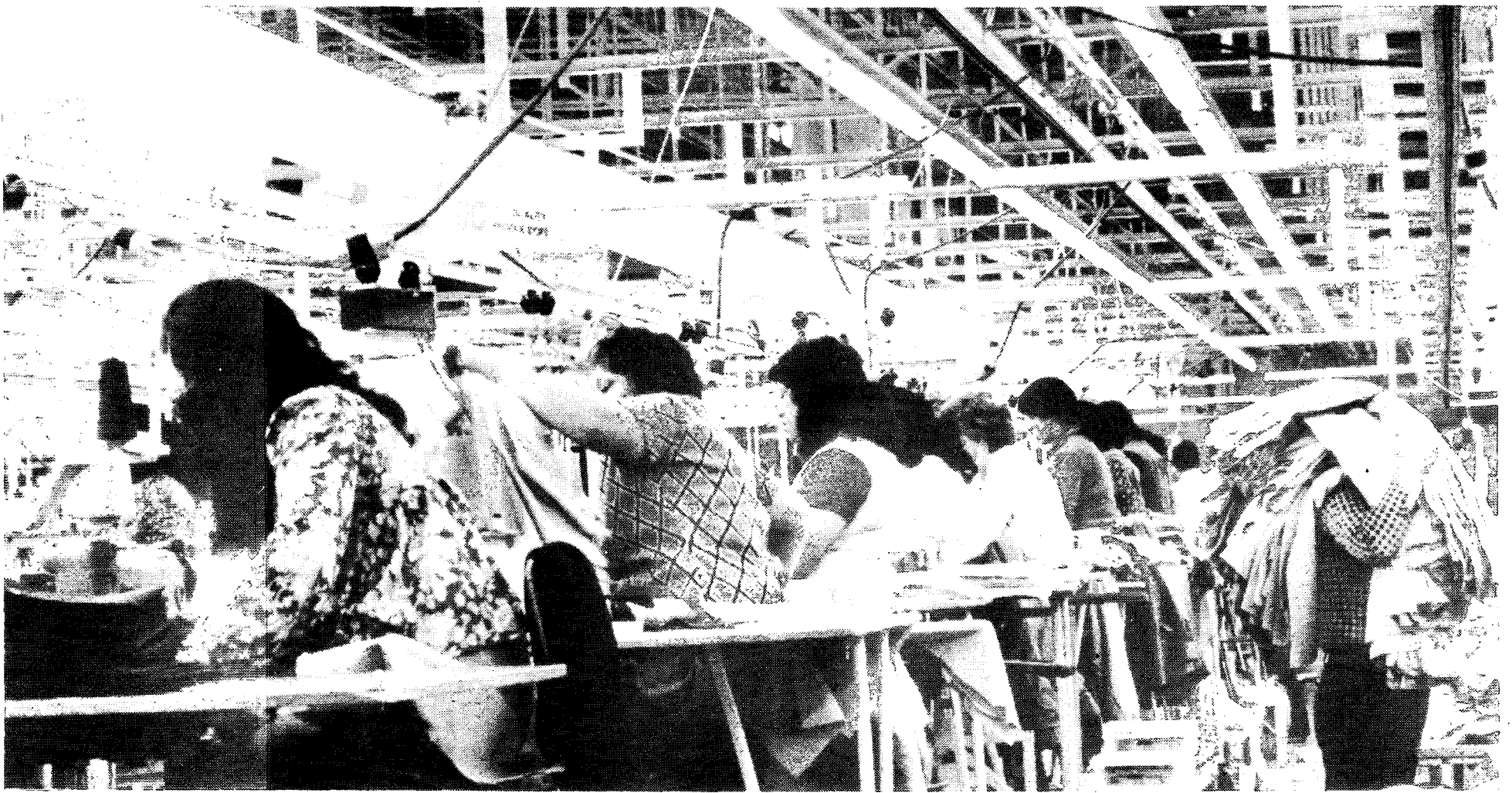


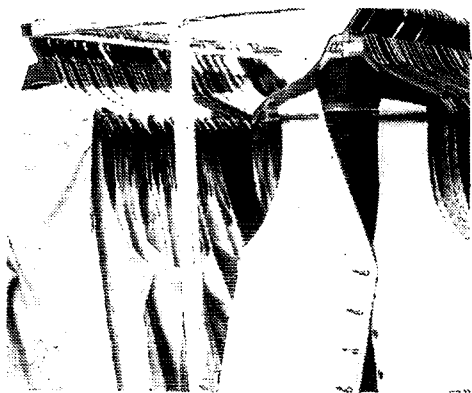
LABOR

Photos/Emily Honig



When striking Farah workers returned after their victorious two-year strike, they found that the organization of production had drastically changed and that they were at a disadvantage.

Setbacks for Farah workers union



By Laurie Coyle, Emily Honig
and Gail Hershatter

AS LOW-PAYING LABOR-INTENSIVE industries have moved to the Southwest since World War II, the use of Chicana/Mexicana labor has been a key factor in their success. Chicanas make up nearly half of all women employed in the apparel industry in Texas, and in border cities like El Paso the percentage is much higher.

At the Farah Manufacturing Company, which makes men's pants, virtually all of the workers are Chicano and 85 percent are women. These women were the force behind a two-year strike and boycott at Farah, disposing of the twin myths that women couldn't be organized and that the Southwest could continue to be a haven for non-union shops.

Unlike many other southwest garment plants that ran away from the unionized northwest, Farah got its start in El Paso. By the early '70s Farah owned 11 plants, five of them in El Paso, making it the second largest employer in town.

Many in El Paso saw Willie Farah as a folk hero who gave his workers turkeys at Thanksgiving and parties at Christmas and provided free health care and refreshments at work.

The workers at Farah tell another story. Before the strike wages were low, raises were based on favoritism, and women with several years on the job were still being paid minimum wage. Women who were willing to date their Anglo supervisors were given preferential treatment, while others were subjected to constant harassment. "The supervisors would snap their fingers at you, bang the machine and push you," one worker recalled. There was no job security and no grievance procedure.

Health and safety regulations were

practically nonexistent. Because of faulty equipment, accidents were common. Needles often snapped off the sewing machines, piercing the eyes and fingers of the seamstresses. Many ailments were misdiagnosed by the plant doctor. When women left the plant to have a baby, they lost their seniority; there was no maternity insurance. "They could keep their turkey," one woman said. "We needed better conditions, better safety."

The strike.

In 1969 the workers began a union drive to affiliate with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). As organizing spread through Farah plants, the company harassed and fired union sympathizers. Despite these tactics, support for the union grew, culminating in a walkout in May 1972.

At first, reaction to the strike was hostile. El Paso media virtually blacked out news of the strike. Picketers were verbally and physically assaulted.

Even more serious were the tensions created within the Chicano community itself, and between the El Paso Chicanos and the Mexicanos from the neighboring border city of Juarez.

Skyrocketing unemployment on both sides of the border, but particularly in Juarez, made it easy for Farah to replace strikers with workers from the swollen ranks of the unemployed. Newspapers and unions in Juarez did support the strike and a small number of Mexican workers at Farah did join the strikers, but 50 percent unemployment in Mexico made it hard to fight against strikebreaking.

Though many strikers realized that the economic crisis forced people to find work where they could, the conflict tended to exacerbate nationalistic divisions at the precise moment when unity was most needed.

As the months wore on strikers faced increasing financial hardships. Union strike benefits of \$30 a week were inadequate for most families. Women who could find work elsewhere did so, but if their new employers discovered that they were Farah strikers they were usually fired.

Despite these hardships, the women discovered new sources of support for themselves as workers. The ACWA sent organizers to El Paso, disbursed weekly strike benefits, helped organize a nationwide boycott of Farah pants, conducted classes, and showed films. The Catholic

church endorsed the strike and allowed the strikers to meet in local church buildings. Workers from other plants in El Paso and across the country lent support to the strikers.

The strike was a pivotal experience for the women involved. They began to do things they had never imagined possible: walking picket lines, speaking at meetings and rallies, and traveling nationally to promote the boycott. Some of the most active strikers formed a rank-and-file group which took the name *Unidad Para Siempre* (Unity Forever).

These experiences changed the way the women look at themselves—as women, wives and workers—the way they relate to their families, fellow workers, supervisors, and community. During the strike they made their own decisions and began to question their own attitudes.

"For years I wouldn't do anything without asking my husband's permission. I see myself now, and I think, good grief, married 19 years and having to ask to buy a pair of underwear! During the strike it started changing. I began to stand up for myself, and I began to feel that I should be accepted for the person I am."

Return to work.

In February 1974 a decision by an Administrative Law and National Labor Relations Board judge prompted Farah to recognize the union. A contract was negotiated and ratified and the workers went back to the plants, hoping that their long struggle would result in better working conditions.

When the strikers returned to the factory, however, they found that the organization of production had changed dramatically. In an attempt to keep up with the market Farah was diversifying production to include men's leisure suits and jackets. Women were given little or no retraining, yet they were expected to meet impossibly high production quotas. Many suffered wage reductions and eventually were fired for low production.

At the same time Farah made serious management errors which undermined his position in the highly competitive garment industry. The recession added to his problems. In the three years following the strike more than half of the employees were laid off, and several of the Farah plants were closed.

Many workers filed grievances protesting the high quotas, layoffs, and harassment of union members, overwhelming

the shop stewards with the number of grievances. The stewards were then harassed by the management when they tried to enforce the contract and were among the first to be laid off during Farah's severe cutbacks. To make matters worse the inexperienced business agents hired by the union were unable to defend the shop stewards and prosecute grievances.

A final problem was that because Texas is a right-to-work state, Farah employees did not have to join the union in order to receive benefits.

In the absence of a strong union, *Unidad Para Siempre* began to play a more active role. It pushed the union to demand more fundamental reforms, including elimination of the quota system, improved training for shop stewards and—most importantly—greater rank-and-file participation in settling grievances between the workers and the company. But the strength of this organization diminished as the company laid off and fired *Unidad* members until only a few remained at Farah. Today these ex-employees feel that the union did not fight to defend their jobs because, like the company, it felt threatened by their activism.

By the time negotiations for the second contract began in 1977, the position of the workers had been weakened by firings, layoffs, tensions among the workers and inadequate support from the union.

Farah management spent the first few days of negotiations telling the workers about the company's financial woes. The workers were told, "You can ask for the moon, but if we give it to you we'll fold tomorrow and you'll all be out on the street." Union lawyers urged the negotiating committee to accept Farah's terms.

The 1977 contracts calls for a meager 30 cent pay boost over three years, eliminates dental benefits, retains the quota system, and allows Farah to lay off workers who have seniority and then call them back to work on a different production line at the minimum wage. Although it is still uncertain whether Farah will recover from its economic crisis, it is already clear that under the terms of the 1977 contract, the workers are paying for Farah's problems.

The contract was hastily presented to the workers in a short meeting held in the cafeteria at the Gateway plant. Union officials read it in legalistic Spanish that few workers could understand, and discour-

Continued on page 17

LABOR

Transit workers may reject NY pact

By George Carrano
and Jonathan Fisher

NEW YORK

RANK AND FILE TRANSIT WORKERS here appear to be less than satisfied with a proposed new contract, negotiated at the eleventh hour between the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Mayor Edward Koch and the Transport Workers Union.

"We won't be fooled again," says Paddy, a 52-year-old bus cleaner, recalling how TWU workers had been pressured into accepting a no-raise contract in 1976 because the "city was broke."

"They told us we all had to pull together—everybody," adds Roosevelt, a bus operator from the Bronx with 12 years on the road, his voice full of bitterness.

Paddy and Roosevelt and others like them among the union's 33,000 bus operators, motormen, maintenance crews and clerks in this city's 13 train yards and 21 bus depots, say they will vote "no" on the proposed contract when it comes before the membership for ratification in a secret, mail-in vote later this month.

An informal poll by the *New York Post* shortly after the agreement was announced found nearly three-quarters of the workers surveyed against the pact. Even union officials say that it has only a 50-50 chance of passage unless there is a sudden turnaround in support.

The controversial agreement calls for a 6 percent increase in wages over the next two years, a flat \$250 bonus payable July 1, and an unspecified cost-of-living adjustment in 1979 in exchange for "increased productivity"—also unspecified. In a major change the settlement allows the MTA to hire part-time workers.

Municipal transit authorities across the country have long sought the ability to hire part-time labor, faced as they are

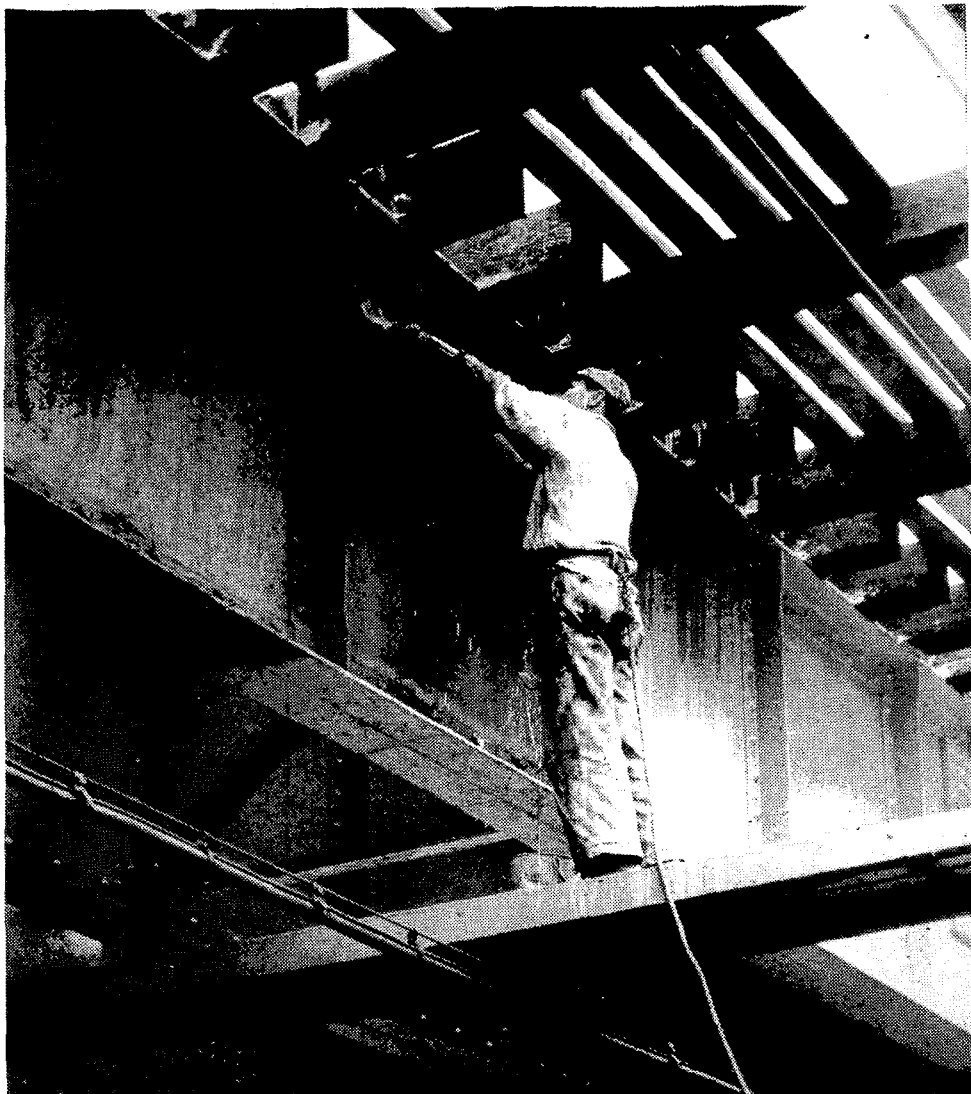
with two short, widely separated demand periods a day, the morning and evening rush hours. In New York the TWU has traditionally remained firm on this question, viewing part-time labor as a threat to their guaranteed 40 hours weekly pay—and possibly to the closed shop. With this contract the TWU has opened the door, however, permitting management to hire 200 part-time workers.

Over the past two years the loyalty once given without question to the TWU from the rank and file has eroded. There is a new attitude of distrust as workers question the fairness of the upcoming mail vote. This is something that the TWU leadership has never had to contend with in the past.

The predominantly Irish leadership is also facing a serious challenge from within the union as the once largely Irish membership is being replaced—through retirement or flight from the city—by a growing number of black and Hispanic members. Divisions within the union ranks are exacerbated by a proliferation of warring ethnic societies, each pursuing narrowly defined group interests and often represented by individuals in higher management. These societies include the Emerald Society, the Columbians, Afro-American Association, Shalom Society and the Hispanic-American Society.

The TWU-MTA agreement was reached four-and-a-half hours after a strike by the transit workers was to have taken place. The clock was stopped at 11:30 p.m., March 31, however, as negotiators for the union, the MTA and the city dug in for a final round of bargaining. Mayor Koch announced five hours later that a settlement had been reached.

Koch had been adamant that the union would have to give back certain benefits won in the past, including paid lunches and paid report-and-clear time. The TWU had been equally adamant that there would be no such givebacks. The agree-



Rank and file transit workers are not pleased with the proposed contract, which does not keep up with inflation and has several important concessions to management.

ment on part-time labor was apparently part of the compromise.

The MTA was apparently more willing to agree to the 6 percent pay hike than the city. Aware that other city unions would demand parity with the transit workers in terms of wage increases and feeling Washington's concern for the city to act tough with its unions at a time when it was requesting financial aid from Congress, Koch had to be persuaded by the MTA that the transit workers "would walk" if they did not get the 6 percent increase.

New York Gov. Hugh Carey, up for reelection this year and not eager for a transit strike, made \$78 million in state funds available for the \$97 million package, and Koch agreed to the deal.

New Yorkers were relieved that the threat of a transit strike was lifted. Koch

had warned city employees that they would not be paid unless they showed up for work, and private industry had been encouraged to take a similarly hard line. Koch had also threatened to use the Taylor law, which forbids public employees to strike against the TWU. When first applied against the teachers union a few years ago it proved a powerful weapon in weakening that union—the right of the union to withhold dues was withdrawn for six months, fines were imposed on the union and the loss of two days' pay for every day out on strike was imposed on the teachers.

If the transit workers reject the proposed contract there is the possibility of an immediate walkout in this mass transit-dependent city.

George Carrano and Jonathan Fisher work for the NYC Transit Authority.

ARMS SALES

Carolinsans mobilize against arms shipments

By Bob McMahon

R A L E I G H, N. C.

ALUCRATIVE CONTRACT FOR shipping arms to Iran has become a target for human rights activists in North Carolina. On March 13 the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) announced it was launching a public campaign to force cancellation of a contract between the state-owned port of Wilmington, N.C., and the Arya Shipping Co., an Iranian government shipping line.

According to AFSC staff worker Chuck Eppinette, the group would seek public hearings before the State Ports Authority in September to challenge the scheduled renewal of the contract with Arya.

Eppinette explained that AFSC was opposed to the shipments "because Iran is one of the leading human rights violators in the world," with an estimated 25,000 to 100,000 political prisoners in its jails. "We oppose the arming of such human rights violators," Eppinette said.

AFSC is also opposed "to the use of arms sales as a part of U.S. foreign policy," said Eppinette. Iran is the largest single purchaser of American military equipment, having ordered over \$8.8 billion in weapons between 1974 and 1976.

Noted Iranian writer Reza Bahareni sent a message of support to the AFSC, calling arms shipments to Iran a

great threat to the lives of Iranians and to peace in the Middle East.

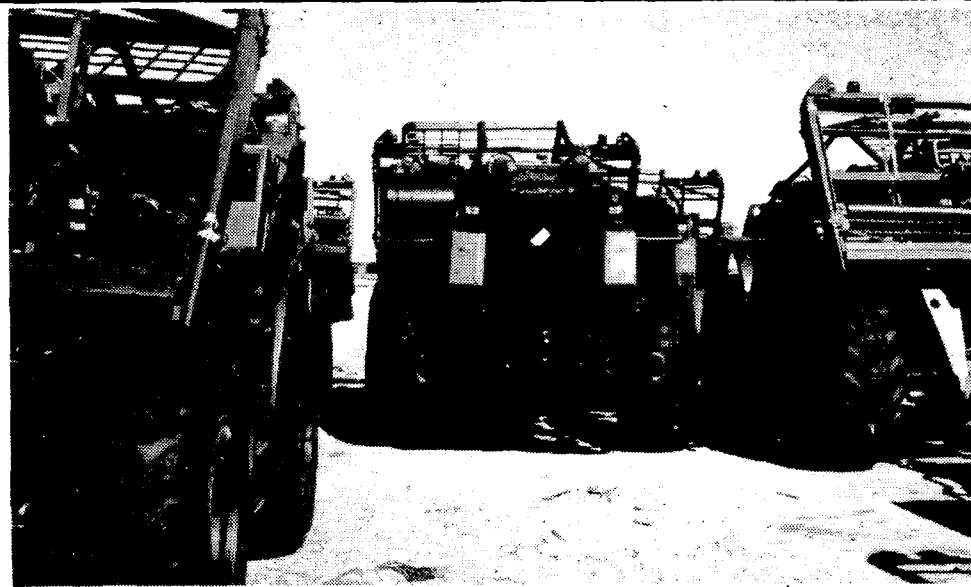
"In a recent assault of the Iranian army on the people of my home town, Tabriz," Bahareni wrote, "American weapons, including tanks, machine guns, artillery and even helicopters sold to Iran by Textron's Bell Helicopter, were used. More than 1,000 people were killed by American-trained Iranian troops."

Bahareni, considered Iran's greatest living literary figure, is the author of *Crowned Cannibals*, a study of the Shah's dictatorship. He himself was tortured while held as a political prisoner in Iran.

The contract between Arya Shipping Co. and the N.C. State Ports Authority was announced Nov. 15, 1978. According to Arya officials, the contract will involve a major relocation of the Iranian company's shipping business from New York and other Atlantic and Gulf Coast ports. Lower labor costs were cited as a major reason for the move.

The precise volume and nature of the new trade were left vague in statements by Arya and the State Ports Authority. Although a State Ports Authority spokesman, Leo Lively, described the new business as "strictly military," Solomon Apararian, assistant director of Arya, claimed that only about half of his company's exports from the U.S. were military.

While Lively had predicted 1,200 to 1,500 containers per year being exported



Military equipment being shipped through Wilmington to the Mideast.

through Wilmington, Apararian estimated the volume at 360 to 480 containers per year. General cargo not in containers will also be shipped from the N.C. Port.

U.S. sales of military equipment to Iran are expected to exceed \$15 billion over the next five years, much of it shipped through Wilmington.

According to Lively, the State Ports Authority and the state government's industry recruiting division have discussed encouraging more military equipment manufacturers to locate in North Carolina to be nearer the port of Wilmington.

Besides the Iranian contract the North Carolina port has recently signed a contract with the Behring Shipping Company, which ships arms to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the second largest purchaser of American arms.

Noting that human rights conditions are not much better in Saudi Arabia than in Iran, Eppinette said that the American

Friends Service Committee would also oppose renewal of that shipping contract.

Eppinette said that AFSC would carry out a campaign over the next six-months to educate the people of North Carolina about the shipments of arms to Iran and Saudi Arabia and the part these arms play in repressing human rights in these countries.

Besides pressing for cancellation of military shipments from North Carolina's state-owned ports, Eppinette said that AFSC would work to have the state government seek non-military business to substitute for these shipments. "We understand the great need for jobs in the Wilmington area," Eppinette said, "but feel that the shipment of military equipment is not the best way to supply these jobs."

Bob McMahon is a reporter in North Carolina who writes frequently for *IN THESE TIMES*.