



Champion International's giant paper mill on the Pigeon River in the Piedmont country of North Carolina.

By William K. Burke

CANTON, N.C.

**T**HE RESIDENTS OF CANTON BUILT THEIR town around Champion International Corporation's paper mill. All of the nicer neighborhoods lie upstream of the 200-acre plant and the polluted water it pours into the Pigeon River. The paper-mill odor, like an outhouse full of rotten eggs, hangs over the company offices, union hall, library and town hall that squat before the mill gates to form the heart of Canton.

It doesn't bother the locals much. "It smells like money to us," says Carroll Israel, vice president of United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) Local 507.

The 1,600 plant workers represented by Local 507 average \$14 an hour tending the machines that produce the paper for 20 percent of the envelopes and 30 percent of the milk and orange juice cartons sold in the U.S. Now Champion and Local 507 have lost a struggle with their neighbors downstream in Cocke County, Tenn., and 1,000 mill hands will lose their jobs.

In December, pressure from the environmental activists of the Dead Pigeon River Council forced Tennessee Gov. Ned McWhorter to refuse Champion's request for a permit variance to violate Tennessee's water quality standards by continuing to allow its effluent to travel down the Pigeon to the Tennessee border, 40 miles below the mill. Champion announced in January it would probably shut down four of the mill's six papermaking machines to meet Tennessee standards.

This apparent conflict between a clean river and jobs has masked another story: the long-term tendency of American industry to update and consolidate operations and lay

## An effluent community worries about cleaning its river and/or saving jobs

off union workers. The drama of neighbor against neighbor, the revelations of dioxin in Pigeon River fish and a cancer epidemic in a downstream community have thus masked the reality that jobs are not being sacrificed to a clean environment, but bartered for competitiveness.

Black water first flowed down the Pigeon River in 1908 when the mill opened. Fish learned to crowd the eddies of clear water where brooks and creeks from higher in the Appalachians joined the Pigeon. To this day local people know it's only worth fishing the Pigeon in those spots where fresh mountain water dilutes the main stream.

In 1912 Champion printed an article in the Newport, Tenn., *Plain Talk* promising that wastes from their chemical pulping process would soon be mostly recycled within the plant. The company kept that promise and has periodically updated its wastewater treatment facilities, spending more than \$24 million since 1960.

**Foaming Pigeon:** But the Pigeon is a small river; at its source above Canton it looks more like a mountain creek. In the summer the Pigeon's flow can dwindle to 50 million gallons a day. The mill has to pollute 45 million gallons a day to meet its production quota. At times Champion simply pours the entire river through the mill.

The mill's giant wastewater plant has upgraded the river from black to brown. Three generations of Cocke County residents have

forgotten that it once ran clear. Below the mill, North Carolinians took to wading their mules and dogs in the river to kill ticks and mites. Folks living along the Pigeon learned to accept the stench, the foul-tasting fish and the undervalued land along the banks.

Then in May 1985 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ruled that North Carolina's water discharge permit for the

### LABOR

Canton mill was invalid because it would not force Champion to comply with either Tennessee or North Carolina water quality standards. Champion in North Carolina sued in federal district court to prevent the EPA from taking over the permitting process. But in December 1986 Judge David B. Sentelle ruled for the EPA. The people of Cocke County saw a chance to clean up their river.

At midnight on Dec. 31, 1986, about 100 Tennesseans gathered on a bridge over the Pigeon in Newport, Cocke County's seat, to form the Dead Pigeon River Council. They prayed, dropped flowers onto the river and vowed that "we will not rest until our river again runs clear."

The council didn't get much done at first. "The community was complacent. We've had an industrial sewer running through our town for 80 years. It's there. It stinks and we hold our noses, but we can't do anything about it," said Bobby Seay, a founder of the

council.

Then the buses came. Champion hired 52 of them to bring 4,000 millworkers, their families and supporters to a January 1988 hearing at the coliseum in Knoxville, Tenn., to hear the state of Tennessee's opinion of the EPA's draft discharge permit for the Canton mill.

Seay said that Oliver Blackwell, a mill executive, had agreed to prevent North Carolinians from attending the Knoxville hearing. "A suggestion was made, nobody agreed to anything," Blackwell countered. The 500 people who drove over from Newport to support the river cleanup were outnumbered 8-to-1 by Champion supporters wearing yellow hats that bore the slogan of the corporation's marketing campaign, "Don't let Champion fall."

Seay said Champion's attempt to overwhelm the Dead Pigeon River Council made the environmentalists local heroes. "They had their day in court in North Carolina, why take over ours and run over us that much more? All of a sudden it became a regional issue." East Tennessee dailies and TV newscasts started featuring the story. "It became David vs. Goliath," said Jerry Wilde, the Dead Pigeon River Council's president.

Many Champion supporters who rode the buses to Knoxville had been among the crowd that packed a similar hearing the previous week in Asheville, N.C., where 100 speakers told the Canton and Champion side



of the story to the EPA.

Champion said it would close the mill if forced to meet the draft permit. The mill provides nearly 2,000 jobs paying \$30,000 and up a year in a county where average per capita income is only about \$13,000.

The company had already planned a modernization to streamline production processes and reduce pollution from the chlorine used to bleach wood pulp for white paper. Champion used its political influence to convince the EPA that its plan was the only solution that would save jobs. The last two Canton mayors are former Champion employees, and North Carolina Gov. Jim Martin has backed all of Champion's decisions (Martin even stood at the North Carolina-Tennessee border and waved to the buses rolling to the Knoxville EPA hearing).

**The color of money:** Most paper-mill pollution is produced when lignin, a fiber that holds trees together, is washed out of wood pulp with chemicals. The dark organic sludge and sediment that results is laced with traces of many toxic and carcinogenic compounds. The main gauge for determining pollution in rivers and streams is a color unit (CU), a standard for measuring sediment in water.

Champion said it could reduce the river's color to 85 CUs just past the Tennessee state line, where three mountain streams dilute it. At 85, the river would be yellow-brown. Right now the Pigeon downstream from the mill ranges from the color of strong tea when the river runs high in winter to a thick, ugly, coffee color in summer. The EPA's draft permit would have required the mill's discharge water to not exceed 50 CUs.

To meet that standard Champion would have to use the ultrafiltration equipment it tested a few years ago. Plant manager Oliver Blackwell said it couldn't be done, because the ultrafiltration process produces a black tarry sludge. Rather than find a way to dispose of the sludge, the company would close the mill.

Blackwell was born and raised near Canton. He doesn't think the color issue is worth the loss of jobs. To prove his point, he placed a jar containing 85 CU mill wastewater next to a jar containing a 50 CU sample. The two liquids looked almost identical. "Is that 35 CU difference worth the broken dreams, the heartache, the pain caused to families?" he asked.

The EPA agreed with Blackwell. After the two public hearings, North Carolina, Tennessee and the EPA worked out a compromise on Champion's terms. In March 1988 the millworkers' jobs seemed safe.

Wilde tried to get his group to accept that proposal, but his rank and file overwhelmed him. "People were saying they'd rather [the river] stayed the way it was than accept a compromise," Wilde recalled. "A lot of them were saying, 'Whatever it takes, take a stick of dynamite and blow the mill up.'"

Downstream residents had just learned the river was not just ugly but possibly dangerous. Greenpeace had supplied the Dead Pigeon River Council with evidence that the chlorine bleaching process used at the mill created 2,3,7,8-TCDD, the most lethal form of dioxin. Present in barely detectable traces in the sediments that dye the river brown, it nevertheless accumulates in the fat tissue of higher animals.

Filletts from a trout taken along the Pigeon contained dioxin at 80 parts per trillion, three times the Food and Drug Administration's safe level for food items. Just after the announcement of the compromise permit,

Greenpeace posted signs along the riverbanks warning people not to eat fish from the Pigeon.

Residents of Hartford, Tenn., a riverfront cluster of houses four miles from the North Carolina line, call their hamlet "Widowville," because many of their neighbors, especially men who fish a lot, seem to die of cancer in middle age. The Dead Pigeon River Council listed 167 Hartford-area residents who had died of cancer in the last 20 years. During that time the average population of Hartford was 500.

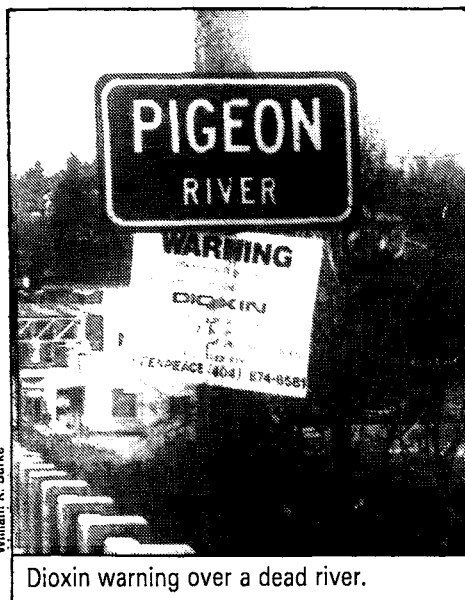
The council asked for research to validate their findings. A study by Tennessee's Department of Environmental Epidemiology found evidence only of "slightly elevated" cancer rates around Hartford. The Dead Pigeon River Council hopes to fund an in-depth study to confirm their suspicions. In the last year, its informal list of people who regularly ate Pigeon River fish or drank from nearby wells and died of cancer has grown to more than 200 names.

**The governor agrees:** Gay Webb, of the Dead Pigeon River Council, has a frozen buffalo carp he saved from the most recent EPA sample of river fish. The foot-long brown fish has sores along its belly and only a small indentation where one of its eyes should be. The EPA officially says that the sampling indicates that the level of dioxin present in Pigeon River fish poses no human health hazard.

Through the summer of 1988 the Dead Pigeon River Council pressured Gov. McWherter to refuse the variance Champion needed to put the compromise permit in effect. "I told [McWherter] if he approved the variance he didn't need to bother to campaign again in East Tennessee; he wouldn't get enough votes to make it worth his while," Wilde said. Last fall McWherter took a raft trip down the Pigeon. Two days before Christmas he denied Champion's variance request.

For a month residents of Canton, egged on by North Carolina Gov. Martin's threat to retaliate against auto pollution from East Tennessee cities, blamed the neighboring state's environmentalists for the threat to their economy and waited for Champion's response.

When Champion announced January 25



Dioxin warning over a dead river.

that the Canton mill would be scaled down, the local newspaper didn't mention that, though the mill's payroll will be cut by about half over the next three years, it's daily papermaking capacity will drop by only about 100 tons to about 1,600 tons. The most modern sections of the mill will remain open and will be further automated to decrease labor costs.

In February 1988, Local 507 signed a concessionary contract at the same time it was spending thousands of dollars supporting the company in the pollution fight. The contract will cost the remaining Canton millworkers their premium pay for Sundays and holidays. The UPIU local at Jay, Maine, was locked out for 16 months when it struck over premium pay. Canton's local sent over \$100,000 to the Jay strikers but dared not resist the same corporate demands because of the battle over the river.

In the mountains above Canton, Champion dammed the Pigeon River to form Lake Logan, whose water keeps the paper mill

## Whether the river runs filthy or jobs run dry, Champion keeps rolling along.

operating during droughts. The lake is full of trout, and its shores are lined with cabins for Champion's elite. George Bush fished there a few years ago.

The executives who gather there to fish, relax and confer about the company's future can't be too upset with the way things have gone. Champion increased net profits by 95 percent in 1987, and sales were up 15 percent for the first quarter of 1988.

Despite reports it was bringing in BE&K, a Birmingham, Ala., construction and maintenance firm that specializes in union busting, to help refit the Canton mill, Champion has retained the loyalty of the Local 507. But it is a loyalty based largely on people's fears for their future. "If they shut this mill down tomorrow Champion would still be one of the biggest paper companies in the world," Israel says. It is unlikely any of them will find jobs near their present wages without leaving the mountains where most were born and raised. "I guess it was jobs vs. the environment, and the environment won," Israel adds.

Though it's clear that Israel's local is badly wounded, it's not at all certain the Pigeon River will run clear a day sooner than Champion International decides to let it. The EPA's new draft permit, released at the end of March, gives Champion three years to comply with Tennessee's standards. Also, the EPA will depend on Champion's willingness to police itself by adjusting the mill's pulp production to the river's seasonal flow. But just last summer mill managers chose to flush sewers that were emitting chlorine gas without bringing the company's own industrial hygienist to the scene. Two workmen needed hospital treatment for chlorine burns, but an observer said managers on the scene were only concerned that work resume quickly.

That attitude in the Canton mill is why the Dead Pigeon River Council doesn't believe any compromise between Champion and the EPA will work. Webb expects his group will fight the new permit in court. Recalling Champion's 1912 promise to clean up the Pigeon, Webb said, "This is just like 1912, but we're not going to wait around." □

William K. Burke writes frequently for *In These Times* on environmental issues.

At one time, farmers waded their animals in the Pigeon River to kill ticks and mites.



William K. Burke



## By Kathie Klarreich

PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI

**I**N HAITI'S HARROWING HISTORY, A SUCCESSFUL government has usually been associated with a strong military. Those leaders without powerful army backing have quickly been deposed. The current Haitian president, Gen. Prosper Avril, is facing the same problem. Not only is he fighting for political stability, but he is desperately trying to fuse the gaps in a very splintered army.

The situation exploded on April 2. In the early hours of the morning, members of the Leopards, a special paramilitary force, stormed the national palace. Their leader, Col. Himmler Rebu, demanded Avril's deportation. Thanks to loyal members of the presidential guard, Avril was intercepted at the airport and returned to the national palace.

Throughout the day, various people were taken hostage by the Leopards. Among them were immediate members of Avril's family, as well as Minister of Interior Acadius St. Louis and his son. In turn, Rebu was taken prisoner at the national palace.

Negotiations followed, ending in the release of the Leopards' hostages. Avril, however, reneged on the deal and kept Rebu prisoner. The Leopards rebelled.

Following Avril's official announcement on Monday, April 3, in which he confirmed that he was back in control, the Leopards took to the streets. By 9 a.m. they had barricaded and occupied the national airport, later threatening to blow it up if Avril did not release Rebu. The Leopards were also responsible for roadblocks throughout the city and the closing of the national television station.

A brief confrontation between a presidential guard tank and the Leopards Monday afternoon left at least four Leopards dead and four more wounded. The Leopards retreated from the streets and shortly thereafter surrendered the airport to the presidential guard.

Early Tuesday morning the Ministry of Information announced that Rebu, along with his wife and four children; Col. Philippe Biamby, leader of the presidential guard; and Col. Leonce Coileau, leader of the army general staff, were all deported by land to the Dominican Republic.

**Old plays network:** "These officers have not been admitted to the U.S.," said a U.S. Embassy spokesperson. "They have, however, been issued American passports."

The mood in Port-au-Prince remained tense



Haiti's current strongman Gen. Prosper Avril has a Leopard by the tail.

## It's *coup du jour* as Haiti's military regime devours itself

as *In These Times* went to press.

While there is little doubt that Rebu was the instigator of the coup, the specific reasons behind the action are not known. If, as some say, the deported officers are involved in drug trading, the coup may be a result of Avril's recent dismissal of four high-ranking military officers. There has been strong pressure by the U.S. to clean up the drug situation.

But the problem in the army runs deeper than mere drug involvement. Ever since the mysterious death last October of Col. Jean Claude Paul, commander of the Dessaline barracks, the level of distrust among army officers has increased. (Paul had been indicted by the U.S. on charges of drug trafficking.) "The coup attempt," said Bobby Duvall, founder of the Haitian League of Former Political Prisoners, "is expressive of the deep

crisis we are facing in the structure of the army."

There exist divisions not only between the various military branches but within the individual units as well. To further heighten the level of distrust, Avril recently created a new military watchdog division to specifically deal with the drug problems.

In addition, Avril has been busy filling vacated positions with officers loyal to the Duvalierist line. Avril himself had 30 years service under the Duvalier dynasty. Among those new positions filled are the chief of police, the head of the national guard and of the Leopards.

**Forum for him:** These appointments seemingly clash with recent moves to promote democratic reform. In February, Avril called for a national forum, in which the participants voted for an electoral board to

begin the process of democratic elections. The move, however, was controversial.

"The whole idea of a forum kills the transitory articles of the constitution," says Louis Dejoie, leader of PAIN, one of the large centrist political organizations. The 1987 constitution, accepted by 90 percent of the voters, clearly outlines the electoral process. "We, the democratic forces, refused to attend the forum because we knew that the people Avril involved would be Duvalierists. They would control the elections."

At the time there was a fear that article 291 of the constitution, which prohibits any Duvalierist from running for office for 10 years, would be deleted. Because Avril gained power through a coup d'état rather than legislative procedure, the constitution does not legally exist. Several weeks ago, however, Avril reinstated the constitution. While article 291 was included, 36 others were not. For many, the reinstating of the constitution was nothing more than an attempt to show efforts toward democratic reform in order to secure financial aid from the U.S.

The need for economic aid is real. The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti has an average daily wage in the capital of less than \$3—in the provinces a pathetic 50 cents.

Avril aggravated the economic situation by recently closing several ports that are popular entry points for contraband. Smuggling has a long history in Haiti. Much is done by *Madames Sarahs*, women who travel throughout the Caribbean trading goods but paying no taxes to the government. Customs officers take a cut, and products flood the market at a cheaper price than those made locally. The real loss, however, comes from large contraband items, like cars.

"The government's move against people making money from contraband," said one government official, "is going to cause unrest and unhappiness."

The aborted coup was a response to unrest and unhappiness within the military. Without power, a strong leader, organization or resources, the Haitian people are obliged to express their discontent in other ways—road blocks, strikes, demonstrations. There seems to be little doubt that unless Avril makes some drastic changes both popular and military unrest will continue.

Kathie Klarreich writes regularly on the Caribbean.

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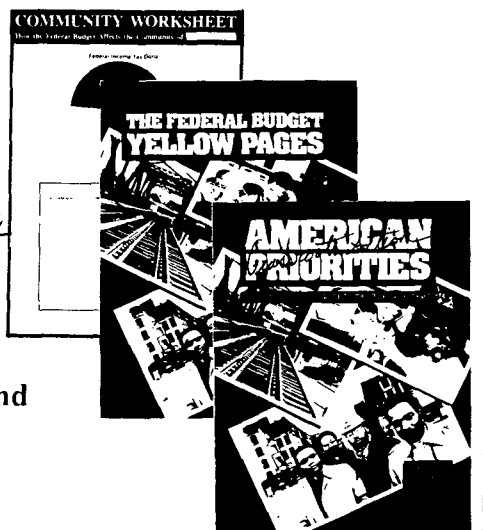
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