

Churches Split on Stevens Boycott

By Religious News Service

The success or failure of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union boycott against the J.P. Stevens textile company has always been strictly in the eye of the beholder.



Some church groups have embraced the boycott as fervently as some others have pointedly refused to take sides. "There is more support on paper for boycott than there was for the United Farm Workers at its height," said Rev. David Dyson, the ACTWU boycott field director and a veteran of Cesar Chavez farm worker campaigns in the early 1970s. "I think that's significant considering the mood of the times. Many of these denominations feel burnt by their social posturing in the 1960s."

Strong support has come from ecumenical groups such as the National Council of Churches. The Governing Board of the NCC, made up of 32 Protestant and Eastern Orthodox denominations, passed a resolution in 1977 endorsing the boycott and promising to participate in it. In 1978, the bishops of six Catholic Dioceses, including the diocese of Rochester, and one archdiocese in the South appealed to J.P. Stevens "to rearrange its priorities and make social justice and the needs of the worker a matter of its primary concern."

Not all church groups, of course, accept the assessment that the struggle to unionize Stevens' workers is a clear-cut issue of social morality. In New England — hard hit economically by textile plants closing and moving south, where Stevens is based, the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society characterized the struggle as a "civil dispute which was felt to be essentially a power struggle between the company and the union (that) would accomplish very little if anything."

Perhaps a microcosm of church division on the issue can be found in the Presbyterian denominations. The United Presbyterian Church, the Stevens family's own denomination, voted to endorse the boycott at its General Assembly in Kansas City, last May. Dyson, the union organizer, who is a United Presbyterian minister, said the vote represented a significant turn-about in what he feels has been a traditionally conservative, anti-union denomination.

But the southern-based Presbyterian Church in the United States, meeting in the same city at the same time, voted down a similar resolution, or overture in Assembly parlance, saying that "both (company and union) appear to be at fault." The Assembly instead expressed concern for all persons whose lives were unsettled by the dispute.

As in most conflicts, each side possesses a powerful arsenal of justification. But here, particularly, the accusations, counter-accusations, even the facts are as wide open to interpretation as a Zen riddle.

In 16 years of campaigning, the union has won three of 14 elections, or about a tenth of the company's 34,000 workers eligible to vote in the organizing contests staged throughout the traditionally anti-union South. Labor law disputes and the slogging pace of negotiations have kept any Stevens employees from coming under a union contract. The right to work laws in the southern states, where most of the company's 83 plants are located, have prevented the union from collecting any dues from their new members.

A three-year-old boycott of Stevens products has cut into profit margins and resulted in the complete or partial participation of about 1,500 stores across the country, according to Dyson.

"The effect of the thing is practically nil," insists James R. Franklin, Stevens public relations director. The company's profits have continued a steady climb over the years, he said. Third quarter profits are 36 percent above the comparable figures last year.

In a companion "corporate campaign," the union has forced two directors off the Stevens board in an effort to isolate the company from the financial community. "Our ties have not been severed with Wall Street. These are pipe dreams," Franklin responded. "Corporations don't have to have board members from the community."



Labor disputes date back at least as early as the depiction of an Egyptian overseer beating a slave in this 1474 B.C fresco from the walls of the Tombs of Reclimir. (RNS)

The current campaign to oust Seamon's Bank for Savings Chairman and President E. Virgil Conway from the Stevens board "is dead," Franklin insists. "They have done everything humanly possible, but he (Conway), has been a rock of principle and has refused to leave." The union, however, vows to continue the campaign against Conway and plans to gun for other directors such as Sidney Weinberg, Jr., a partner in the Goldman Sachs and Co. investment firm.

The issues, targets and tactics are not as obvious as they were in the United Farm Workers of America boycott, which persisted through the early part of this decade and produced several contracts with the California grape and lettuce growers. The ACTWU has fewer options.

While the Stevens products may be as ubiquitous as grapes and lettuce, they are much harder to identify. Only a third of Stevens' products is sold retail, most of it under about 40 different brand names, like Hockanum, Boldeena, Wool Press, Worumbo, Forstman, Twist Twill and Big Mama. The remaining two-thirds are sold to manufacturers.

Unlike Cesar Chavez's Farm Workers Union, which was never under the National Labor Relations Act, the ACTWU cannot engage in a "secondary boycott." So while the farm workers could picket with impunity all supermarkets selling non-union grapes and lettuce, the ACTWU is prohibited by labor law from boycotting the manufacturers who buy the bulk of Stevens products, or the stores selling them at retail.

Only in the past few years of the struggle has the issue become a social justice cause attracting wider interest. The union has painted a dastardly image of the company as "the nation's number one labor law violator," for persisting in a pattern of intimidation, surveillance, blacklisting, unjust firings and other unfair labor practices which inhibit any attempt at a free election.

Indeed, the company has been cited 20 times in the past 16 years by the National Labor Relations Board for illegal practices. But the board has also dismissed 150 other charges brought against the company.

Stevens has also been charged with maintaining hazardous working conditions because the subsequent fines and damages are cheaper than capital improvements. But Franklin said, "these are not Stevens problems, they are industry problems." For example, in the problem of excessive noise levels, "there isn't a manufacturer that can engineer that noise out."

A dissection of the available facts presented by both sides indicates that the boycott may have produced more of a severe public relations problem than a financial blow. The union says profit margins have dwindled in the home furnishings division, the company's only retail area that can be touched by the boycott. According to an investor's report published by a brokerage firm, the retail home furnishings division's 5.8 percent margin was the lowest in the company. The company has maintained its high sales figures as a result of a dramatic, high-volume discount campaign of front-line products across the country.

The low margin is considered normal in the highly competitive and volatile textile industry, according to two Wall Street brokerage firm textile analysts who asked that their names and the names of their firms be withheld. Another analyst, Ed Johnson of Ed Johnson Redbook textile and chemical industry analysis service, said many of the big department stores curtailed their purchases of Stevens products, compelling most textile com-

panies to sell at a discount. "Sears has been cutting back inventories for years," he said.

Some of the major brokerage houses have continued to recommend the Stevens stock to their clients, but with a caveat about the union troubles. Most feel the stock is slightly and momentarily under-priced. Hypothetically speaking, if the union campaign were to dissolve tomorrow, the stock "might go up a point," Johnson predicted.

"Of the five major textile companies in this country, J.P. Stevens has been dead last in profit margin," said Dyson who claims to have seen front-line bed sheets selling for as little as 2.98 in an Alabama department store. Mr. Franklin flatly denies any product-wide discount effort. "They're not being discounted to move them," he said.

The low margin is the result of the company's "fully integrated" position which never lunges into producing trend materials, Franklin said. While some companies may be "heavy" in popular materials like corduroy or denim, Stevens does not boost its existing capital investment in these areas to realize only a short term profit gain.

The dispute may soon set records of longevity as a social and — as some churches would have it — moral issue. Neither side is about to flinch.

This seasons most tasteful gifts mixed nuts, chocolate, dried fruit, chocolate covered nuts gift packed from \$3⁰⁰

THE NUT HOUSE
1520 Monroe Ave.
244-9510
10-6 Daily 10-5 Saturdays

An excellent Christmas selection:
THE DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER 1868-1968
by
Reverend Robert McNamara
ST. BERNARD'S SEMINARY BOOKSTORE
2260 Lake Avenue 254-1020
Hours: M, W, F: 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. Other excellent selections available.
Tu, Th: 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. Telephone Orders welcomed.
Wed. evening: 6:30 - 7:30

FUNERAL DIRECTORS

- QUALITY STANDARDS
- DIGNITY IN SERVICE
- INTEGRITY IN BUSINESS

BURNS - HANNA FUNERAL HOME
1795 Ridge Rd. E. 467-5745

Paul W. Harris FUNERAL HOME INC.
570 Kings Highway South (corner Titus)
SPACIOUS PARKING Private casket selection room 544-2041 AIR CONDITIONED

ARNDT FUNERAL HOME
1118 Long Pond Road near Maiden Lane 225-6350
Ronald John Arndt — Funeral Director
Parishioner at St. John the Evangelist
On Premise Casket Selection — Parking for over 70 cars