

Center settles

Andrew's Center, a foster-care facility, has settled into its new home at St. James Parish, thanks to the help of friends and supporters. Page 6.



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Boycotts invite buyers to be aware

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Boycotts are as American as apple pie. Or at least as American as the Boston Tea Party, which grew out of a tea boycott.

In the United States, boycotts have been a common tool used by unions during labor disputes.

Boycotts have also been used to fight for social justice.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. rose to national prominence, and the civil rights movement took off as a result of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955. And Cesar Chavez drew national attention to the plight of farm workers and their efforts to unionize through boycotts of lettuce and table grapes in the early 1970s.

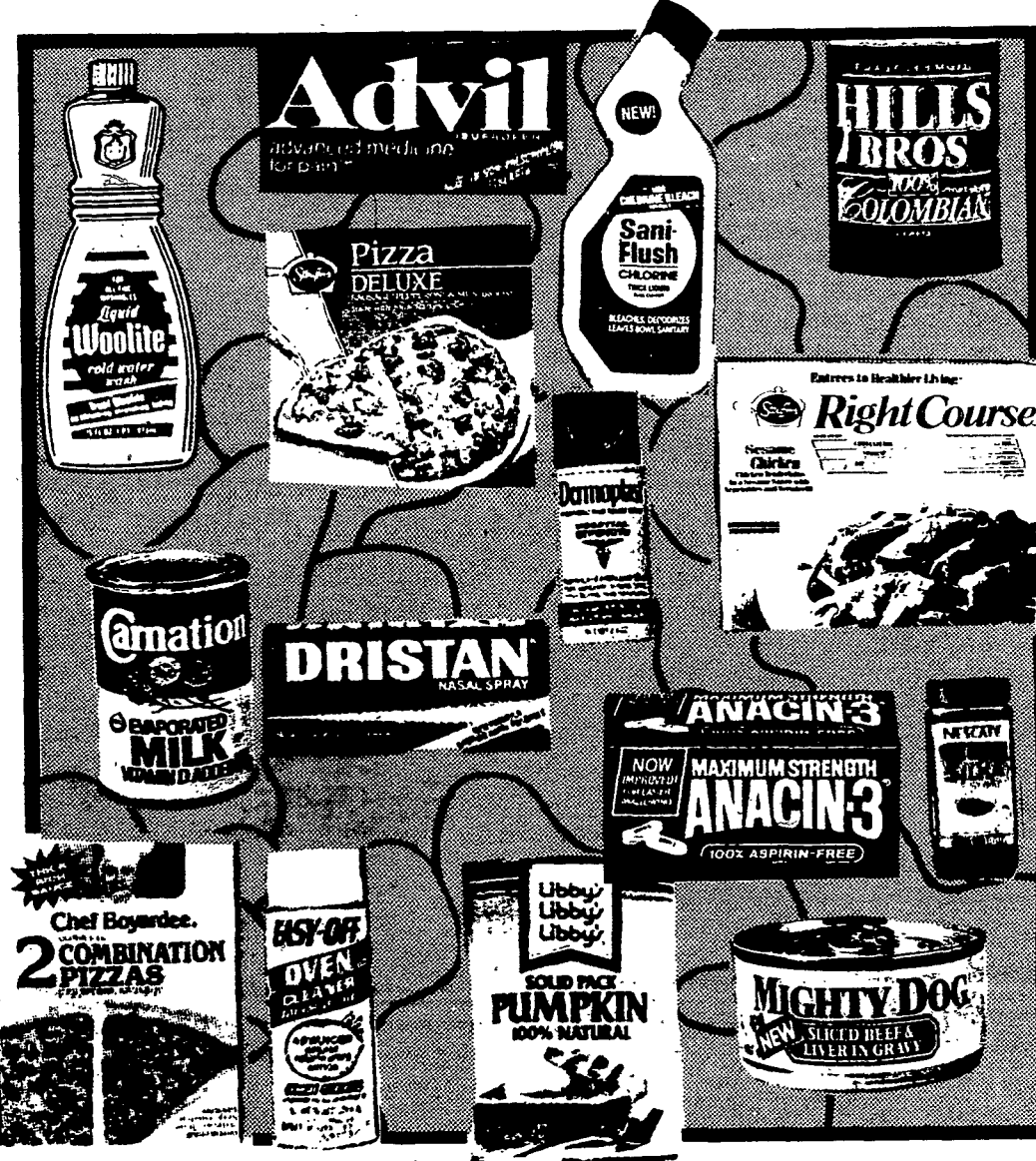
Such efforts — some successful, others not — are not simply historical events, however.

Currently, three boycotts are attracting local attention and support from labor, social-activist and church groups: The Nestlé/American Home Products boycott, California table-grape boycott and the Salvadoran coffee boycott.

Nestlé was earlier the target of one of the most famous boycotts in recent years.

In the 1970s, various citizen and health groups became alarmed at the company's techniques for marketing infant formula — of which it was and continues to be the world's largest producer — in Third World nations.

According to boycott organizers, the company's actions led women to replace breast feeding with bottle feeding. But



Lorraine Hennessey-Graphic artist

The current Nestlé/American Home Products boycott targets a variety of products and services, ranging from Advil to Black Flag to the Stouffer Rochester Plaza Hotel.

except to hospitals — where free distribution would be limited by WHO guidelines.

Although Nestlé agreed to comply with the WHO code, by 1988, many of people who supported the original boycott felt compelled to reinstate it.

"Nestlé is dumping infant formula at the same levels as before the boycott," observed Janice Mantell, director of Action for Corporate Accountability, a Minneapolis-based group that is promoting the current boycott. Mantell's organization also has targeted American Home Products, a U.S.-based company that also provides infant formula to Third World nations.

In an interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Mantell claimed that Nestlé has been circumventing the code by getting doctors in Third World hospitals to request formula supplies. Those supplies are then given to new mothers whose babies become used to bottle- rather than breast-feeding, she said.

"If a mother starts out bottle feeding, it's difficult — when you find out the cost of formula — to initiate breast feeding," observed Dr. Ruth Lawrence.

Dr. Lawrence, a prominent local pediatrician and a vocal supporter of the Nestlé boycott, said that doctors and nurses working in hospitals in Third World countries are frequently swamped with patients and work. "If (health workers) don't want to support the mother with breast feeding, it's easier to give the bottle," she said.

But, Dr. Lawrence countered, "a few minutes spent with a mother is extremely valuable in the life of that baby. The data in the Third World shows that the infant mortality rate is 50 percent when not breast fed, and 10 percent when breast fed."

Nestlé officials maintain, however, that they are following the WHO code.

"You boycott someone because they are ignoring the situation or doing nothing about it, but that's not the case with Nestlés," said Thad Jackson, special issues director for Nestlé.

In an interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Jackson claimed his company has actually gone beyond the requirements of the WHO code — which, he pointed out, was intended for countries, not for companies.

A 1989 plan of action developed by the company includes provisions calling for encouraging nations to adopt the code, distributing to mothers educational material explaining the benefits of breast feeding, and requesting meetings between company officials and boycott promoters "to get a consensus on what we should be doing, where we should be going," he said.

"(Boycott organizers) said there was no reason for discussion, that the only solution was complete withdrawal of supplies," he added. Such a solution, Jackson noted, was not acceptable to the company.

He said Nestlé is currently conducting test projects in Guatemala and the Ivory Coast to see what effect complete withdrawal of infant formula supplies would have on hospitals. "We hope to build a model that could serve as a framework for other countries," Jackson said.

Such assurances have not convinced boycott supporters, however. They point out that in 1985, a joint WHO/UNICEF-sponsored meeting concluded that free formula supplies to hospitals were unnecessary. A 1986 WHO meeting intended to clarify the earlier code reached the same conclusion.

As a result, a broad-based coalition of groups and religious organizations — including the Rochester-based Sisters of Mercy's Mercy and Justice Committee — have endorsed the boycott. Earlier this year, students at Our Lady of Mercy High School joined a number of Catholic schools across the country in refusing to sell Nestlé candy to raise money.

Other endorsers of the boycott include: the Sisters of Charity of New York; the Sisters of St. Francis (Indiana); and the National Council of Church's in Christ.

The Diocese of Rochester, which endorsed the earlier boycott, has not endorsed this one, however.

And, according to Lourdes Perez-Albuerne, associate director for justice and peace for the diocesan Division of Social Ministry, the diocesan board of social ministry is not likely to endorse the boycott in the near future.

The problem, Perez-Albuerne said, is not the merit of the boycott, but simply that the Division of Social Ministry does not have the staff to promote more than one boycott at a time.

Since Nov., 1989, diocesan efforts have focused instead on the California grape boycott.

That boycott, like the Nestlé campaign, is in some respects a resurrection of an earlier boycott. But whereas the United Farm Worker-sponsored grape boycott of the early 1970s was intended to force farmers to negotiate with the fledgling labor organization, organizers of the current boycott say the concern now is health.

"The issue is that pesticides pose not only a danger to farm workers, but also to consumers in the local market," observed Father Dan O'Shea, a diocesan priest in residence at Our Lady of the Genesee Monastery in Piffard.

Father O'Shea, who worked with farm workers in California during the early



1970s and who currently works with the Farm Worker Advocacy Center in Genesee, is one member of a diocesan sponsored committee that provides parishes with speakers, copies of a farm-worker-produced film about pesticides — the "Wrath of Grapes" — and information about the grape boycott.

The farm workers are calling for the end of the use of five pesticides they claim cause illness, cancer, death and birth defects among farm workers. They further allege that people living downwind of areas regularly treated with pesticides show higher incidence of such problems, and that residues of the pesticides linger in grapes sold to consumers.

In California, two cancer clusters have, in fact, been identified in two towns: McFarland and Earlimart. The clusters — areas in which the incidence of cancer is much higher than would be expected under normal circumstances — are located in farm country where pesticides are used.

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because of unsafe water supplies — and the fact that formula-fed infants are deprived of the natural immunities provided by mother's milk — bottle-fed babies in Third World nations are five to 10 times more likely to die than breast-fed babies in the same regions.

In addition, once the babies were on infant formula — provided free at hospitals to encourage mothers to use it — and the mothers' milk dried up, families were forced to spend substantial portions of their income on formula. To save money, many mothers diluted the formula to make it last longer. The result was increased malnutrition.

A worldwide boycott ensued, ending in 1984 when Nestlé agreed to observe the World Health Organization's 1981 Code of Marketing Breast-Milk Substitutes.

The WHO code restricted what could be pictured on product labels, required companies to provide clearer directions for product use, stipulated that companies not advertise their infant formula products, and forbade them to distribute free samples