

DIOCESAN NEWS

Groups call for protection of children, workers

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As the Christmas shopping season took off in earnest, the Diocese of Rochester and several Catholic groups, as well as unions and other organizations, asked people to consider the conditions of those who made the products found in shopping malls.

The groups participated in various events to highlight workers' rights and corporate responsibility Dec. 3-4, including protests at a federal building and a local shopping mall, as well as a speech on corporate responsibility by a Catholic brother.

On the night of Dec. 3, about 70 people calling for an end to child labor and sweatshop abuses marched from the Sister Cities Bridge to the Kenneth B. Keating Federal Building in downtown Rochester to meet with U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter, a Democrat representing the 28th District.

The march's sponsors included the Diocese of Rochester, Catholic Family Center, the Sisters of Mercy Leadership Team and the House of Mercy, an outreach center the Mercy Sisters operate in Rochester. Also sponsors were the Rochester Labor Council and UNITE — Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees of the AFL-CIO.

The marchers presented Slaughter a petition with 2,000 signatures addressed to President Bill Clinton, Congress and the White House, Task Force to End Sweat Shop Abuses. The petition called for the federal leaders to "adopt policies that will assure the payment of a living wage to all workers, independent monitoring of corporate codes of conduct and effective and enforceable workers' rights at home and abroad."

The Rev. Richard Gilbert, pastor of the First Victorian Church in Rochester, presented the petition to Slaughter on behalf of the marchers. The minister decried the exploitation of workers — particularly children — by U.S. companies.

"We think globalization has a price," Rev. Gilbert said. "And we think this is too high a price to pay."

Slaughter said she agreed with the marchers' concerns and would present the petition to President Clinton.

"Americans are good people," she said. "They do not want to buy cheap goods that



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Hazel Moellering, 6, left, and Shenzi Scipione, 6, walk with Maria Scipione, in a Dec. 3 Candlelight March organized by Rochester's Season of Conscience committee.

are produced by tiny little hands, by children."

On Dec. 4, members of UNITE and the Rochester chapter of Pax Christi, a Catholic peace group, picketed outside Marketplace Mall in Henrietta, according to Vivian Rightmeyer, a Pax Christi member.

Demonstrators gave shoppers UNITE leaflets that asked them to consider the alleged plight of workers in El Salvador who make Claybrooke men's dress shirts, Rightmeyer said. The shirts are sold at Kaufmann's, a department store located at the mall.

"The May (Department Stores) Company, which owns Kaufmann's, Lord & Taylor and other department store chains has chosen to have its shirts made at the Hanchang Factory in El Salvador," the leaflet read. "Nearly 800 young women who work there earn sub-poverty level-pay, made worst (sic) by illegal deductions and many hours of unpaid work."

The *Catholic Courier* contacted the May Company, based in St. Louis, Mo., for a response to UNITE's allegations. Rhonda West, company spokeswoman, said her company had only learned of the allegations through reporters contacting the May Company on Dec. 3, and that May had not been contacted directly by UNITE.

West sent a statement via fax to the *Courier*

that said the May Company has a "vendor responsibility program" that requires the company's suppliers and subcontractors in other nations to comply with applicable safety, labor and wage laws.

"In addition, we conduct inspections of all facilities that manufacture our private labels prior to the beginning of any contract, and at least annually thereafter, and we require an annual letter of compliance from these suppliers," the statement read.

However, West said that no independent human rights or workers' rights organizations currently monitor May subcontractors and suppliers to verify their compliance with wage and safety laws.

"We take all these allegations of non-compliance very seriously, and are beginning an immediate investigation into those allegations made by UNITE," the statement concluded.

Meanwhile, on the evening of Dec. 4, Brother Michael H. Crosby, OFM Cap. of Milwaukee, spoke on corporate responsibility to 30 people at the Strong Museum Auditorium in Rochester. Brother Crosby is the author of several books on spirituality, as well as the book *Catholic Church Investments for Corporate Social Responsibility*.

A vocal critic of the tobacco industry, Brother Crosby also serves as coordinator of the Tobacco Program for the Interfaith

Center on Corporate Social Responsibility, a national group that promotes socially responsible investing.

Brother Crosby's speech was sponsored by Common Ground of Upstate New York, Inc., a group that opposes abortion, euthanasia, war, economic injustice and capital punishment.

Although it may seem impossible to change the current global system so that workers and the environment are treated better, people interested in promoting economic justice can change some things on a company-by-company basis, Brother Crosby stressed.

Among the suggestions he made, Brother Crosby said shareholders in companies can support resolutions at shareholder meetings that call for a corporation to protect workers, or to engage in environmentally sound practices.

On another level, consumers can make a difference by writing to companies and asking about how they treat their workers here and abroad, he said. Companies like to keep customers happy, he noted, and may be more likely to listen to consumers than to investors.

Brother Crosby said that the current global economic system puts workers and the environment far down on the list of economic priorities, which is headed by the wants of a relatively few people. This contradicts the biblical vision of economic justice found in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, he noted, pointing out that none of the early Christians were ever in need because they shared their wealth.

"They were so grounded in their commitment to each other as persons, that resources were relative, not persons," he said.

The three events last week concluded on a local level the National Labor Committee in Support of Worker and Human Rights' "Season of Conscience" that began Oct. 4.

During the three-month period unions, churches and other groups throughout the country held events to protest economic policies that exploit foreign and domestic workers.

A National Labor Committee statement promoting the "season" said: "As governments and corporations promote policies of predatory economics, without protections for workers' rights, workers are being dragged into a race to the bottom."

Abortion conference site moved to Strong Medical Center

ROCHESTER — A controversial University of Rochester conference on medical abortions has been moved from its original site at the Marriott Hotel in Henrietta to Strong Medical Center, 601 Elmwood Ave., on the university's campus.

The conference, titled "Medical Abortion Using Transvaginal Ultrasound," will take place at the medical center on Friday, Dec. 12, and Saturday, Dec. 13. It is intended to teach primary care physicians about a chemical abortion procedure developed, in part at the university, during the early 1990s.

Paul Lambiase, director of Continuing Professional Education at the university's medical school, confirmed the conference was moved. He said the reason was that university officials were concerned that a counter-conference scheduled for

Dec. 12 in the Marriott would distract abortion conference participants from the "educational" purpose intended by the abortion conference organizers.

The counter-conference has been organized by the New York Lambs of Christ pro-life activist group, as well as the Christian American Family Life Association.

The medical abortion conference has drawn considerable criticism from the Monroe County Coalition for Life, an organization of several pro-life groups that includes the Diocese of Rochester. The groups had planned protests outside the Marriott during the conference.

Suzanne Schnittman, diocesan consistent life ethic coordinator, released a statement Dec. 8 about the abortion confer-

ence's move to Strong Medical Center. She said the pro-life coalition still plans to protest the conference, and she urged Catholics interested in supporting the protests to call her at 716/328-3210, ext. 304.

"The U of R is no doubt worried about the conference," the statement read. "The move to the medical center places it under their close scrutiny. This does not mean it has disassociated itself with the questionable procedures being promoted, but it certainly seems eager to hide them."

Meanwhile, Feminists for Life and the St. Luke's Medical Association (formerly the Catholic Physicians' Guild) will host a speech by Dr. Joel Brind at Strong Med-

ical Center on Friday, Dec. 12, from 2 to 4 p.m. Brind is a nationally known expert on abortion and its relation to breast cancer, and a critic of chemically induced abortions. For information on his speech, call 716/458-2842.

— Rob Cullivan

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