

JP Stevens: Gateway to the Unorganized South

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by ANNA GOLD

"J. P. Stevens has more respect for the machines than for its workers. We're treated like animals, forced to beg for what should be ours automatically!" The anger behind these words goes a long way towards explaining why workers traveled a grueling 11 hours from North Carolina to New York City to protest the anti-union policies of their employer. At least 3,000 people, from local unions, from the New York City Labor Council, from community and religious groups, civil rights activists, and students joined in the demonstration sponsored by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU).

The marchers ringed the Stevens building March 1st while inside several hundred shareholders carried the protest to the Annual Stockholders Meeting. Five religious organizations sponsored two resolutions. The first demanded to know how much money had been spent by the company to stop unionization and the other demanded a report on the placement of minority groups in the workforce — a report which would necessarily reveal a systematic policy of racial discrimination throughout the Stevens firm.

14-YEAR UNIONIZATION FIGHT

These events were only one more step in a fourteen year battle to unionize J. P. Stevens. Nearly 45,000 people work in 85 Stevens plants, concentrated primarily in North and South Carolina. Since June, 1976 the ACTWU, with the support of the AFL-CIO has been pushing a nationwide boycott of all Stevens goods. "We just couldn't do it alone," explained Rylan Briggs, Stevens worker, to the union newspaper. "We're just one factory, and Stevens has 80 different factories . . . and even if we went out on strike to get a contract here, they would just send the work someplace else. So the only way we're ever going to get anything done, is to keep our union strong in Roanoke Rapids and for pressure to continue to come from outside."

Indeed, the struggle to unionize Stevens has been a long and hard one, and it has become the symbol for the attempt to organize the South. During the Eisenhower years, the chairman of the National Labor Relations Board said that events at Stevens are "so out of tune with a humane, civilized approach to industrial relations

that it should shock even those least sensitive to honor, justice, and decent treatment." If anything, the situation has become worse.

Had the first resolution passed at the stockholders' meeting, one of the things that would have been revealed was that Stevens had to shell out \$21,000 back pay to Doris Barber who was illegally fired for asking a pro-union question at a shop meeting. In fact, since 1965 the NLRB has found Stevens guilty of serious violations in 15 cases. Three times the cases went all the way to the Supreme

Court and still Stevens was found guilty. More than \$1.5 million in back pay has been awarded to 280 workers whose rights were violated.

COMPANY RELIES ON LENGTHY COURT CASES

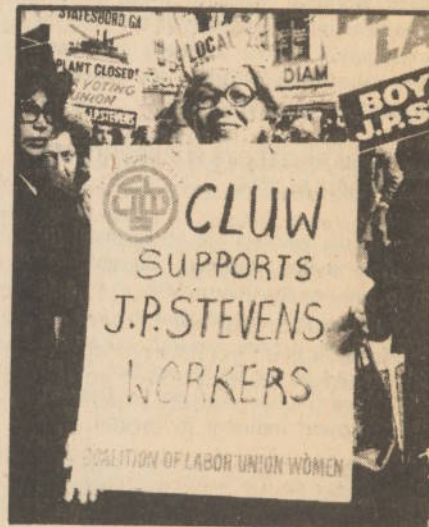
While each of these cases represents a real victory for the workers, the lengthy judicial process put a real damper on the unionization drive. Clearly Stevens feels that fines and back pay are a small price to keep the unions out and the workforce intimidated.

But this is only one of the ways that Stevens has fought the organizing drive. Had the second resolution been passed at the stockholders' meeting it would have been revealed that Stevens has consciously kept the workforce divided by pursuing racist employment policies and spreading racist myths. Recently a federal judge in Raleigh, N. C., found a pattern of racial discrimination in hiring and employment practices at the firm's seven Roanoke Rapids plants. (Roanoke Rapids has been the scene of some of the most intense organizing work.)

Stevens supervisors constantly put out propaganda equating unionization with a Black takeover, in an attempt to frighten white workers. At one plant where 80% of the workers are white, the supervisors put out a letter which said, "A special word to our Black employees. It has come repeatedly to our attention that it is among you that the union supporters are making their most intensive drive — that you are being insistently told. . . that by going into the union in mass, you can dominate it and control it in this plant, and in these Roanoke Rapids plants."

Despite such tactics, the 3,500 workers in the Roanoke Rapids plants voted in favor of being represented by the ACTWU in August of 1974. However, as Sol Stettin, head of the Textile Workers division said, "In its traditionally contemptuous fashion, the company has stymied negotiations. . . by stubbornly and illegally withholding agreement on even the most basic elements of a standard union contract."

Meanwhile, base pay at the plants remains at \$2.81 an hour, and work is being shipped out to other non-union locations. Dust levels at some locations have been found to be almost three times the level permitted by OSHA standards — and it is these kinds of conditions that explain why more than 100,000 textile workers are now suffering from byssinosis, a serious lung disease.



FOOTHOLD TO UNIONIZING THE SOUTH

Why has Stevens fought the union so persistently? The deputy director of the National Organizing Department of the ACTWU began to answer that question when he said that "a breakthrough against Stevens will provide a major foothold in the South."

During the 1950's the industry fled south to take advantage of low taxes cheap labor, and to get away from the northern unions. The gains were immediate. In 1950 textile workers earned four cents above the average industrial wage, and by 1955 they were earning one cent less. The textile mills are the single largest source of jobs in five southern states, hiring about 25% of the workforce.

Racism has been the most significant barrier to the unionization of these workers. Until recently low income white workers monopolized the textile jobs and almost half of these workers were (and still are) women. Whenever the workforce showed any signs of militancy, they were told that their jobs would be opened up to Black workers — and that was sufficient to kill any movement. By 1975 the wages for textile workers were an average of \$1.30 less than the national average for industrial workers. In 1976 less than 10% of southern textile workers were organized.

Times are definitely changing however. In the 1960's the new wave of industrialization in the South saw many white workers leave the industry and the mills were opened up for the first time to large numbers of Black workers. Now Black workers represent 20% of the workforce. These Black workers brought with them their experience of struggle for civil rights and their pro-union attitudes. Young Black workers, many of them women, have been in the forefront of the fight for organization in the southern mills, and they were instrumental in the victory at Oneita Mills three years ago.

STEVENS PROTECTS SUPERPROFITS FOR CAPITALISTS

The textile workers are up against a formidable enemy, however. Stevens is second only to Burlington Mills in size, and its management realizes that the future of their super profits depends on keeping unions out of the South. In fact, Stevens is holding the line not only for itself, but for southern industry in general, which

counts on maintaining its system of exploitation by keeping the workforce divided.

At the same time the workers in the mills are fighting not only for themselves but for the future of all workers in the U. S. The fact that the South has been unorganized for so long has hurt all workers, because it has always been possible for a company to run away from union demands by moving South. This bitter truth has had a direct effect on the job market in Philadelphia as clothing shops and shops like Eaton have fled to non-union areas.

The ACTWU has said that organizing Stevens is a top priority. They have spearheaded the boycott campaign and sought to bring the issue before all progressive Americans. It is our responsibility to support these efforts.

However, if the fight to unionize the South is to succeed, it is going to take a much more conscious and aggressive movement than the ACTWU seems prepared to lead. Stevens has already amply shown its contempt for labor laws. The defeat of J. P. Stevens can only happen if the ACTWU combines aggressive organizing work in the Stevens plants with a massive support campaign that involves workers throughout the country. The timidity of the ACTWU leadership is a real handicap. In the struggle to organize Farah, for example, the rank and file workers struck the plant initially over the opposition of the union leadership which saw a strike as being two years away. And

while the boycott is a good tactic, it must be accompanied by demonstrations and actions that aim at mobilizing and educating not only the ACTWU rank and file but the whole labor movement.

While the ACTWU makes a lot of convincing speeches to civic leaders, few of its members are even aware of the drive. "I didn't know about the March 1st demonstration until a week later," a long time operator told the *Organizer*. "And I would've gone, too!"

Similarly, racism has been the major factor in keeping the unions out of the South. It is only by attacking white chauvinism head on, and on this basis consciously building unity between the white and Black workers that the workforce will be strong enough to win. However in its internal education the ACTWU only mentions the problem in passing.

There is no doubt that the tide is beginning to change in favor of the southern workers. Thanks to the militant leadership of the newer Black workers and thanks to the growing unity between white and Black workers and men and women, the South is finally on its way to being organized.

The future is in our hands, however. It is up to rank and file workers everywhere to take up the struggle as their own, to actively promote the boycott and to move their union leadership to turn token support into active and militant participation. When we have done that, and only then, the Stevens workers will be assured of victory, and it will be a victory for every worker in the U. S.

