

Boycott causes stock drop former textile workers say

By KEVIN HARDEN
Of the Emerald

It may be too early to tell if a nation-wide boycott of J.P. Stevens textile products has been successful in pressuring the company into negotiating with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), but it has brought the company's stock prices down over the past few years, two former Stevens employees said in Eugene Thursday.

The workers, the Rev. Ed Fleming and Myrtle Cribbs, told noon-time shoppers on the Eugene downtown mall and an audience in the city council chambers Thursday evening that working conditions in Stevens' textile plants throughout the southern United States haven't improved, but the increased pressure from the boycott has caused the company to lose money.

On a tour of the west coast to promote the boycott, Fleming and Cribbs explained that even though the working conditions haven't improved, recent gains by the ACTWU in several Stevens plants have shown the company's board of directors that the workers want the union as their bargaining agent.

Fleming and Cribbs were in Eugene as part of a boycott organized two months ago by the Lane County J.P. Stevens Boycott Committee. The Stevens company, the second largest manufacturer of textile products in the nation, has been convicted of more national labor law violations than any other company in U.S. history. Most of these stem from the company's refusal to negotiate with the ACTWU for improvements in working conditions and pension benefits for the 44,000 Stevens workers.

Both Fleming and Cribbs worked for the J.P. Stevens company plants in North Carolina and Georgia for more than a combined total of 35 years. Fleming, also a minister, left the Roanoke Rapids, N.C. plant two years ago after 23 years of employment there.

Cribbs, a Georgia housewife, worked in the Statesboro, Ga. Stevens plant for 13 years, until it was closed in 1975 because the workers had participated in union activities.

Fleming and Cribbs joined members of the Lane County boycott committee during the noon hour Thursday to distribute leaflets on the downtown mall in front of the Bon Marche department store.

They had planned to meet with the Bon Marche store manager to ask him to join their boycott, but were turned down. Jacques Moose, of the boycott committee, explained that the manager has declined several meetings with the committee, saying the disputed J.P. Stevens merchandise is purchased for each store from the Northwest Regional Bon Marche office in Seattle.

Moose said, "He's said that it's out of his hands, that there's

nothing he can do about it and that's a direct quote from him."

The downtown Bon Marche has been targeted by the committee because of its central location, Stefan Ostrach, also of the boycott committee, explained. The store has regularly featured J.P. Stevens' products on its shelves, but it is only one of several stores in Eugene and Springfield that sell the products.

While much of the merchandise sold by the Bon Marche, Meier and Frank, Fred Meyer and other stores are either marked with the J.P. Stevens or a recognizable label, some products are sold unfinished and other name brand labels are later added.

According to Artha Adair, a national representative of the ACTWU traveling with Fleming and Cribbs, the Stevens company also sells imperfect products as unfinished goods and distributes them to several retail stores.

Several Woolworth stores, Adair said, sell Safeco-brand towels, which are also manufactured by Stevens. Montgomery Ward's and J.C. Penney's stores also sell Stevens' goods, she said.

"There's no way you can boycott them, they buy from all different companies. All you can do is ask who makes them and then if they say Stevens, just walk away," Adair explained.

Even though sales of J.P. Stevens' products may be increasing nationwide, the boycott has taken a large share of profits from the company. "Stevens' sales are up, but that's only because they're selling their stuff at a reasonable percent of the advertising costs for local stores and things like that. So we know that they're not making much profit."

Some organizations that have long held stock in the Stevens company are beginning to divest their holdings, Adair said. One Methodist Church organization in Seattle which holds nearly 20,000 shares of Stevens' stock has been considering divestment of their stock, she said.

Stanford University in San Jose, Calif., recently sold 3,000 shares of the stock after pressure from several boycott groups, Adair explained.

"Every group we've talked with has endorsed the boycott and our campaign," Fleming explained. "We haven't appeared before a religious group yet that didn't express some agreement with us."

Even though the southern J.P. Stevens textile plants haven't joined unions yet, the company's plants in six foreign countries are all represented by strong labor unions in their countries, Cribbs said. Company textile plants in New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Mexico, Canada and France are all part of labor unions.

The American textile mills should be the leaders, Adair said, "and we will increase the union organization to show the company that this is what the workers want."

"This isn't just a labor-management issue, it's an issue of social and economic justice for workers in the South. We want to bring the South into the 20th Century," Adair said.

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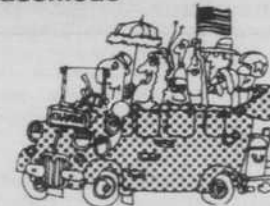
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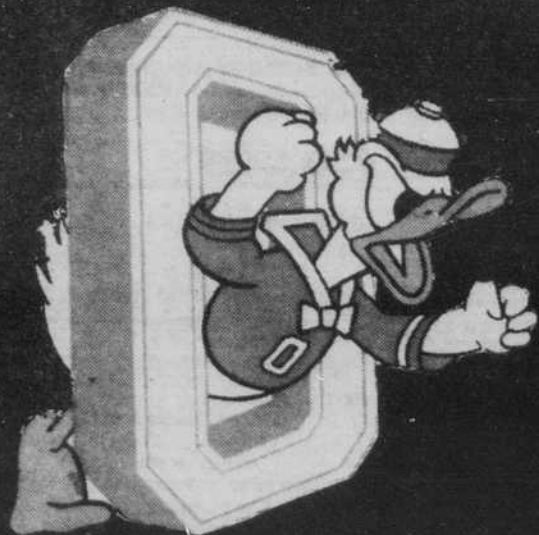
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