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Formulating a successful boycott

Activists have much to learn from a protest against Nestlé's sale of formula to the Third World

This year marks the 10th anniversary of something very important — the return of the Nestlé boycott. It is an opportune moment for reflection on a struggle where the good guys almost won, as well as a time to consider how it might have turned out differently.

If you haven't heard of the Nestlé boycott, it might be because it is still difficult to believe what Nestlé did (and continues to do). Unfortunately, the facts don't lie: In an effort to gain greater market share for its infant formula, the American corporation began a policy of aggressive export to the developing world. What's wrong with that, you ask?

Plenty. Especially for people who normally think this global free-market orthodoxy is a good thing, the case of infant formula is a stark wake-up call. You see,

poverty and the lack of appropriate sanitation in developing nations make formula deadly for babies. Nestlé knew that, but continued to push its products.

Here's how it works: If breast-feeding doesn't take place for a few days, the mother's breast milk dries up. This means if there is no money for formula

— in the lesser-developed countries, a definite risk — then the babies starve. If somehow the mother does manage to get the formula, it needs to be mixed with water. In LDCs, the water is often contaminated, leading to more health risks for infants.

Not only didn't Nestlé care, it actively used these facts to its advantage. Like a crack dealer, the corporation gave out a few samples of the formula free — enough to make breast milk dry up. Thus, mothers were forced to spend precious money on formula, which of course often traded off with food for other family members.

As if that weren't bad enough, Nestlé dressed salespeople up like nurses and sent them into hospitals. These "milk nurses" taught new mothers about bottle-feeding and how to mix formula. Medical personnel were paid to endorse the products, and brand-name specific advertising showered local hospitals. The most recent issue of Ms. magazine details these practices, among others.

The advertising campaign was "successful" for Nestlé but, of course, not for the people. Breast-feeding rates reached all time lows. Today, the majority of infants in LDCs are bottle-fed, only 44 percent nourished by breast milk. Literally millions of babies died.

This continues. International organizations estimate that 1.5 million babies worldwide die each year because of the replacement of breast-feeding.

This started in the '70s, you say. Why



OPINION



Jeff Shaw

hasn't anyone done anything before now?

The answer is that they have, beginning in 1977. A broad-based coalition crossed national boundaries to protest the corporation's policies. A U.N. hearing declared that no advertising could promote breast-feeding substitutes in the developing world, and it additionally endorsed labeling, which explained the health merits of breast-feeding. The World Health Organization approved the code in 1981.

It should be noted that the Reagan administration was the only U.N. member state to vote against the code. But it's probably just a coincidence that three of the top formula manufacturers in the world are U.S. corporations and were fiercely lobbying against the WHO standards.

In 1984, after seven years of activist struggles, Nestlé gave in and promised to

comply with the WHO code. Unfortunately, this began a corporate campaign of stealth backsliding. From the beginning, Nestlé tried to undermine the restrictions.

Some of Nestlé's efforts have been patently offensive, such as in the Philippines where they opposed the practice of babies rooming with their mothers on the grounds that it would promote breast-feeding. Some have been almost funny, such as in India. There, Nestlé argued that it didn't have to adhere to regulations requiring a warning label in the center of the product because "it wasn't possible to locate the center of a cylindrical can." Either way, the International Code Documentation Center says Nestlé is still not in compliance with the WHO code.

What are the lessons here? First, we can never let our guard down. Activist victo-

ries must be verified by continued monitoring of corporate activities.

Second, though a boycott is a necessary and valuable short-term strategy, it is insufficient for the long-term. The Nestlé example shows that even a corporation that relies on the health and welfare of infants isn't afraid to sacrifice them in this type of economy.

It's long past time to reign in corporate abuses of health and safety standards. We should abandon the international trade agreements that allow this type of behavior to slip through. One and a half million babies a year depend on it.

Jeff Shaw is a columnist for the Emerald. His work appears on alternate Wednesdays. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.

Thumbs



TO THE OREGONIAN:

In an editorial last week, the newspaper urged readers to participate in the Cascade Policy Institute's "Better Government Competition." While the paper presented the contest as an opportunity for readers to make worthwhile suggestions for local government, the editorial neglected to mention that the institute is not the balanced bastion of better

policy described. In fact, CPI is a right-wing, anti-government think tank. According to the group's pamphlet on the contest, ideas must reduce the cost of government and "ideas for creating new government services are not encouraged." By passing off a biased think-tank as an open organization, The Oregonian is doing its readers a great disservice. It legitimizes the anti-gov-

ernment ideas of the institute without acknowledging the editorial stance that it entails, and it reduces the ability of readers to evaluate and debate the policy slant implied. Of course, this isn't the first time The Oregonian has deceived its readers. Like many newspapers, The Oregonian regularly relies upon right-wing organizations for editorial information and often prints

op-ed pieces from propaganda groups such as the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute and American Enterprise Institute. None of these facts or opinions are identified by political affiliation or primary source of funding — corporations. The problem isn't that The Oregonian prints right-wing ideas. The problem is that the paper doesn't acknowledge the biases of its opinion

pieces, making it difficult for readers to evaluate the quality of ideas expressed. The paper wouldn't dream of running a pro-labor column and not identifying its union backing, but it prints some pieces churned out by the right-wing propaganda machine and never mentions the incestuous relationship between those writers and corporate America or the religious right.

CORRECTION

The campus brief "Museum hosts Identification Day" (ODE, March 10) should have stated the museum is hosting the event on Saturday. The story "Herbal ecstasy has dangerous effects" (ODE, March 9) should have stated that Erin Link's experience with herbal ecstasy was limited to one incident several years ago. The Emerald regrets the errors.