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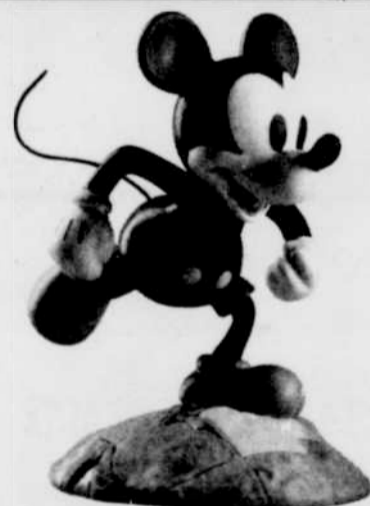
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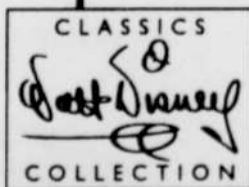
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NATIONAL news

TEXAS SHOWDOWN

Exxon Mobil Corp. stands by its policies despite ongoing demonstrations staged by gay activists By Gip Plaster

An Exxon Mobil Corp. official says rallies against the company planned in several cities are the result of misinformation in the gay and lesbian community.

The company, formed by the merger of Exxon and Mobil in November, decided to keep Exxon's employment policies and benefits rather than adopt those of Mobil, which protected gay men and lesbians from employment discrimination and provided domestic partner benefits.

Demonstrations against the company are planned or have already occurred in cities around the nation, including two in Exxon's home state of Texas.

"We do not appreciate that the company took something away that was already in existence," says Dan DiDonato, one of the organizers of a Houston-based rally.

The former Exxon Corp. has long maintained that it does not discriminate based on sexual orientation but has balked at including the phrase *sexual orientation* in its nondiscrimination policy.

The company instead includes only the categories required by federal law.

The former Mobil Corp., however, included the phrase *sexual orientation* in its nondiscrimination policy and offered domestic partner benefits.

The two oil companies merged as a result of Exxon acquiring Mobil, and the new company is governed by Exxon's rules.

Former Mobil employees who already were receiving domestic partner benefits will be allowed to keep them, but former Exxon employees and former Mobil employees who had not signed up for the benefits will not be eligible. Exxon's nondiscrimination policy, which does not mention protection based on sexual orientation, applies to all employees of the newly merged company.

Exxon Mobil spokesman Tom Cirigliano, formerly of Exxon, says: "We think it is unfortunate [that rallies are planned]. We think there has been a lot of misinformation out there."

He adds that the company has chosen to adopt a broad nondiscrimination policy rather than one that mentions specific categories of people, unless that mention is required by law.

Cirigliano says Mobil Corp. no longer exists, so any policies it had are no longer an issue.

"Exxon acquired Mobil in the merger. This is a continuation of Exxon's policies," he says. "Mobil Corp. doesn't exist anymore. All of Mobil's policies were discontinued."

Cirigliano adds that the company bases its benefits on legally recognized marriages or part-

nerships because benefits based on any other criteria would force the company to invade employees' privacy to verify their eligibility.

"We don't think any company has the right or the knowledge to get into personal relationships," he says.

Exxon Mobil, which does 80 percent of its business outside the United States, recognizes same-sex relationships in Holland, for example, because such relationships are legally recognized there, Cirigliano says.

"This isn't a political issue. This isn't a gay issue. It's a matter of personal rights," he explains. "We believe that there

is only one criterion we can apply throughout the world: Is it a legally recognized partnership?"

Chris Martin, spokesperson for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance at the former Mobil Corp., previously used strong words in reference to the policy changes.

He called the decision to eliminate Mobil's policy and benefits "a real kick in the teeth" and said Exxon Mobil "really screwed up."

But Martin's words are now more carefully chosen. Meetings are planned that he hopes will force the company to clarify its position on nondiscrimination.

He cautions, however, that he is not sure if Exxon Mobil management is committed to doing the right thing for gay and lesbian employees.

"I don't have enough information," he says. "I certainly hope that it is."

Martin adds that the trend nationally is toward offering benefits and including sexual orientation in nondiscrimination policies.

"The company is going to have to go back at some point to adopt what Mobil had in the first place," he says.

In the meantime, an estimated 2,500 former Mobil employees could get their benefits and nondiscrimination protection back as a result of collective bargaining.

The Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union has said that its collective bargaining agreement with the former Mobil Corp., which includes a strong policy against sexual orientation discrimination and requires equal benefits, must remain in effect another two years.

The union says it will fight to keep the benefits.



Exxon Mobil Corp., formed by the merger of Exxon and Mobil in November, decided to keep Exxon's policies and benefits rather than adopt those of Mobil, which protected gay men and lesbians from employment discrimination and provided domestic partner benefits

■ GIP PLASTER is a Texas-based journalist and frequent Just Out contributor.