

Leaders Squabble Over Mushroom Boycott

(AP) — Oregon's only farm workers' union is hoping that a widening grocers' boycott against Pictsweet mushrooms will help the union land its first major labor agreement.

However, decisions by two major grocery stores to stop buying the brand haven't produced any movement toward negotiations. What has resulted, though, is a political squabble in the company's hometown of Salem, where Mayor Mike Swaim thrust himself into the issue by successfully urging Fred Meyer stores to quit buying the Pictsweet mushrooms.



Supporters of workers at the Salem Pictsweet plant rally on the Capitol steps. (AP Photo)

Fred Meyer, which operates about 120 stores in the West, announced its decision in early July.

State Senate President Gene Derfler, a Republican and longtime Salem businessman, said Swaim's actions hurt the

city and interfered with a matter that should be settled between the employer and its workers.

"If he continues to attempt to stop businesses from operating in Salem, his ability to continue spending taxpayer money will disappear," Derfler told the Statesman Journal. "I've never had the Senate president suggest I shouldn't intercede on behalf of Salem companies," Swaim countered. "Why is it these Salem citizens don't have the same legitimate claim on my time? I don't think it's inappropriate at all that I intercede in their interests." Grocery giant Safeway joined the boycott in mid-July.

Swaim and the union, Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United, claim that employees at the mushroom farm work under "stoop-labor" conditions for low pay.

PCUN organizer Erik Nicholson estimated that 90 percent of the Pictsweet plant's employees are Hispanic and that most are paid the state minimum wage of \$6.50 an hour, up to about \$7 an hour.

Pickers tell of working 12-hour shifts, often bent over or on their knees harvesting mushrooms in darkness except for beams from miner's-type lights on their heads.

A June 8 citation from the state

Department of Consumer and Business Services directs the company to "address the hazard of eye strain."

The light intensity from the battery-operated lamps diminishes during final hours of picking, the reports says, and employees "experienced dizziness, redness and pain in their eyes."

The company, part of Tennessee-based United Foods, isn't commenting on the situation. Several requests for comments from the Salem office and telephone messages left with Pictsweet offices in Tennessee were not answered.

Burger King Offers Exchange in Toy Recall

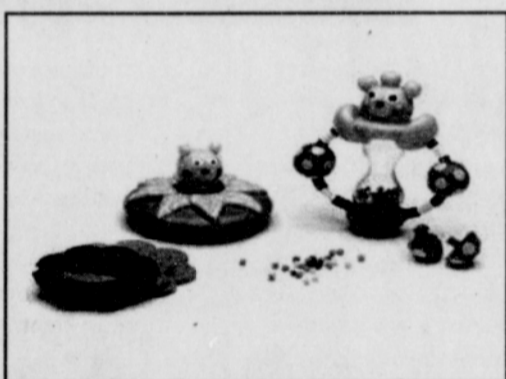
Burger King announced a voluntary nationwide recall of 2.6 million Kids Meals toys because they are potentially hazardous to children. It's the company's third toy recall in less than two years.

The fast-food giant warned parents last week to take the "Look For Me Bumble Bee" and "Hourglass Space Sprout" toys away from their youngsters and return them for a free replacement toy.

There have been no injuries or deaths associated with the toys, but Burger King decided to voluntarily recall the toys after an independent consultant found they could break into pieces, posing a choking hazard to

small children. Burger King received 18 reports of the toys breaking. They were offered for children under 3 years old.

The Consumer Product



'Look For Me Bumble Bee' and 'Hourglass Space Sprout' are deemed potentially hazardous to kids.

Safety Commission joined Burger King in making the announcement, which was on the company Web site. "We guard the safety and well-being of our customers very seriously," said Burger King spokesman Chris Clouser. "We believe this is an appropriate precautionary move."



PHOTO BY SHERENA SMITH/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Families in Need Get Legal Help

The St. Andrew Legal Clinic, 807 N.E. Alberta, was recently awarded \$111,500 by the Meyer Memorial Trust to support its low cost legal services to low-income residents of the Portland metropolitan area. The trust, established by the late Fred G. Meyer and not affiliated with the current Fred Meyer stores, also awarded a local grant of \$65,000 for the Homowo Festival of African Arts, taking place Saturday, Aug. 25 and Sunday, Aug. 26 at the South Park Blocks on the Portland State University Campus. For more information regarding the legal clinic, call 503-281-1500.

Qwest Ordered to Give Faster Service

(AP) — Oregon regulators have given Qwest Communications International six months to reverse a decline in service to their customers by answering calls more quickly, and the company says it will hire more than 2,400 employees to do so.

Under the agreement approved by the Oregon Public Utility Commission, Qwest must answer customer calls within 20 seconds at least 85 percent of the time. The PUC can issue fines of as much as \$50,000 a month if the goals are not met.

Qwest also will be under scrutiny for 17 months, during which it will be required to provide monthly progress reports to the PUC and maintain performance goals.

Qwest officials have blamed the delays on staffing shortage and an increased volume of calls to its sales promotions for wireless telephone service and DSL lines.

State regulations require Qwest to answer 85 percent of nonrepair calls in no more than 20 seconds. In April, the most recent number available, the company answered 29 percent on time, down from 69 percent the previous April.

Consumer complaints to the PUC have increased from 186 in January to 323 in May. The PUC received 321 complaints from June 1 through June 22.

Workplace Discrimination Law Sponsored

U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., has voiced his support for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

The bill, introduced in Senate last week and cosponsored by Smith, protect gay men and women from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

"Every American should have the opportunity to work and should not be denied that opportunity because of their sexual orientation," said Smith. "That legislation represents the next logical step in anti-discriminatory protections in the workplace."

The legislation will not create any special rights for gays and explicitly prohibits quotas; it also exempts small businesses, religious organizations and the military, and does not require benefits to the same-sex partners of employees.

"The measure is a simple, narrowly-crafted solution to a significant omission in our civil rights law," said Smith. "No one should be denied employment on the basis of sexual orientation or any other factor not related to ability to do a particular job."

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