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# Mississippi catfish plant workers win wage increase and better working conditions in Indianola, 1991

## Timing

13 September

1990

to:

16 December

1990

## Location and Goals

Country:

United States

Location City/State/Province:

Indianola, Mississippi

Location Description:

Delta Pride catfish factory

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Campaigners sought to reform unsafe working conditions, raise insufficient wages, and end employee harassment by gaining:

?The right to use the bathroom when needed

?Worker health insurance and pension plan

?Paid holidays

?Wage increases and shift limits

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 081. Traders' boycott

Notes on Methods:

The researcher was unable to determine when the boycotts of catfish began.

Segment Length:

Approximately 16 days

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- African American female factory workers

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

Sarah White, Mary Young, Margaret Hollins

Local 1529 of the United Food and Commercial Workers union

Partners:

United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW)

External allies:

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

Congressional Black Caucus

Supermarkets in St. Louis, Chicago, Atlanta, and Detroit

Involvement of social elites:  
Congressional Black Caucus

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Local 1529 and the UFCW began the campaign. However, it is not clear when exactly the NAACP, Congressional Black Caucus, and supermarkets joined the campaign

Segment Length:

Approximately 16 days

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

Delta Pride factory owners, supervisors, Mayor Charles Evers

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Police officers verbally and physically abused workers picketing during the strike.

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

Indianola, Mississippi is home to the Delta Pride catfish factory. Although Mississippi is among the poorest states in the US, catfish farming accounts for \$350 million a year and is the state's largest agricultural industry. Owned by a cooperative of 400-500 white landowners, massive tracts of land in the Mississippi River Delta are

artificially flooded to create ponds conducive to farming and processing catfish. While truck drivers and loaders tend to be African American men, most line workers are African American women, often single heads of households.

The catfish farming system arguably resembles harvesting cotton via sharecropping, in which black farmers were perpetually indebted to white landowners. In many cases, the land currently being used to farm catfish is former cotton land which was passed down via the very same families that operated plantations. Catfish plant workers were required to purchase all of their own safety gear and dress from the company, the cost of which became deducted from their dismal paycheck. Though the 178 owners of the factory were white males, 90 percent of the 1,200-person workforce at Delta Pride were black and female.

The working environment at Delta Pride in 1986 was unsafe and inhumane. Workers were underpaid, earning a minimum wage of \$3.80 per hour, and pushed to work unimaginably long hours—12-hour workdays standing in ankle-deep water laden with bleach and ammonia. Workers were not given any holidays except for Christmas, health insurance was not provided, and bathroom breaks were considered a privilege – workers had to ask for permission to be granted a timed 5-minute bathroom break at the discretion of the factory supervisors. Due to the unsafe conditions and the repetitive motion, line workers' physical health took a serious toll: carpal-tunnel syndrome was commonplace, as was receiving burns from the boiling hot “fish water.” Workers' eyes were often exposed to ammonia and bleach. Supervisors pressured the factory line to work as quickly as possible, often increasing the conveyor belt speed to maximize profits, yet increasing the likelihood of serious injuries.

Sarah White, an African American 31-year-old single mother with a 4-year-old son, worked at the Delta Pride factory. In winter 1986, White's co-worker Mary Young received a union card in the mail from the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) and White signed it, recognizing the life improvements—for workers and their families—achievable with the help of a union. Throughout the winter, White and Young collected signatures from co-workers, hoping to one day unionize Delta Pride. The determined pair often stood outside of Wal-Mart in Indianola for hours in the cold, bravely encouraging fellow co-workers to take a stand.

After two months of collecting signatures, the women formed an organizing committee of 50 workers, making it possible to hold a union vote at the factory. Workers were warned by supervisors that they would be fired if found to be associating with any union activity. Factory owners pushed hard against unionizing, hiring Mayor Charles Evers, the brother of a famous assassinated civil rights activist, to lead a malicious counter campaign. In the face of intimidation, the workers overwhelmingly supported unionizing, and the Delta Pride catfish factory became Local 1529 of the UFCW. In the first year of unionizing, the workers won extended bathroom rights (six times a week, five-minute duration) and three-year job security contracts. In response to the newly formed union, labor management became harsher, treating workers with disrespect and taking away small benefits like free catfish for employees during the holidays.

In 1989, probably responding to union awareness campaigns, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined Delta Pride \$32,800 for neglecting to prevent and treat carpal-tunnel syndrome among its line workers. In 1990, with sales of \$144 million at Delta Pride, workers' starting wages were still just \$3.80 per hour, and the union was forced to take a more ambitious agenda. The union demanded an immediate \$7.50 wage increase for employees with at least 18 months experience. The factory owners responded with a \$5.00 raise over a 2-year period, which coincided with a scheduled federal minimum wage increase.

Incited by the factory owners' refusal to negotiate fair wages, and after management threatened to revoke some bathroom privileges, the Delta Pride workers voted 410-5 to begin a strike. On September 13, 1990, workers began picketing outside the Delta Pride Factory. Police officers violently beat and harassed some picketing women, like Mary Green, who was beaten and punched in the stomach while being called racial slurs.

As the strike continued, Sarah White, Mary Green, and Margaret Hollins testified before the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington, D.C., explaining their struggle. Gaining the support of some members of Congress, they waged a nationwide consumer boycott against Delta Pride catfish. Major supermarkets in St. Louis, Chicago, Atlanta, and Detroit boycotted the purchasing and selling of Delta Pride products. National civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) endorsed the campaign, putting a national spotlight on Delta Pride.

On December 16, 1990, the Local 1529 chapter of the UFCW successfully reached an accord with the Delta Pride owners and ended the strike. Their actions proved to be extremely successful. Out of the pact, the workers won ten paid holidays a year, a pension plan, a harassment-free workplace, and eight hours of work maximum with at least twelve hours between shifts. Most importantly, the workers were granted the right to relieve themselves whenever necessary. After the strike, White remarked that the strike “was really about the bathrooms.” The Delta Pride action is the largest strike of black workers in Mississippi on record, with over 500 workers participating in the strike.

## Research Notes

Sources:

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[Back to top](#)

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