U.S. textile workers win campaign in South (J.P. Stevens Boycott) 1963-1983

Spring
1963
to: October 20,
1983
Country: United States
Location Description: Southern United States

Goals:
to unionize workers in the JP Stevens textile firm

-to improve working conditions and wages

-to end racial discrimination

-to organize the South and to grow and affect the lives of most workers in the industry

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 038. Marches
• 039. Parades
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 076. National consumers’ boycott

Methods in 5th segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 038. Marches
• 039. Parades
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 076. National consumers’ boycott

Methods in 6th segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 016. Picketing • Picketing at Stevens’ shareholders meetings
• 038. Marches
• 039. Parades
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 076. National consumers’ boycott

Notes on Methods:
The time span was 20 years. Each segment was about 3 years and 4 months

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Group characterization:

• textile workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Jim Pierce and Harold McIver, leaders of the Industrial Union Dept, AFL-CIO.

-Sol Stetin, leader in TWUA, VP in Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU)

-Paul Swaity and Richard Rothstein, leaders in ACTWU

-Bruce Raynor, ACTWU southern director

- ACTWU’s president Murray Finley, Secretary-treasurer Jack Sheinkman, vice-presidents Sol Stetin and William DuChessi

Partners:
Industrial Union Department (IUD), AFL-CIO
- Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA)
- Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW)

- On November 30, 1978, “Justice for JP Stevens’ Workers Day”, activities were held in 74 cities across the US.

External allies:
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

- Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
- National Organization for Women (NOW)
- Council of Labor Union Women
- American Jewish Congress
- United Presbyterian Church
- National Council of Catholic Women

Involvement of social elites:
National boycott was endorsed by several U.S. governors, 56 US representatives, and some US senators.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Union organizers and workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- College students (especially Northern colleges) in the mid 1970s

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
It is unclear when the many allied groups joined the struggle.

Segment Length: (The time span was 20 years. Each segment was about 3 years and 4 months)

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
J.P. Stevens textile firm, led by CEO Robert Stevens, and later by Whitney Stevens

Campaigner violence:
None known.

Repressive Violence:
Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
5 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

In most of United States history cloth was manufactured largely in the North while cotton and other fibers were grown largely in the South. In the early twentieth century textile manufacturing workers formed unions to increase wages and safety, reduce working hours, and gain dignity. As the labor unions grew in strength, textile mills moved to southern states to avoid the need for collective bargaining, along with factories where clothing apparel was made from the cloth.

By the early 1960s the basic textile labor force had grown to 589,500 workers and apparel workers had increased to 308,500. Successfully organizing these workers into unions would make a considerable difference in unionizing the south. The Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) chose the J.P. Stevens corporation for a major organizing campaign.

J.P. Stevens had been founded in 1813 in Massachusetts but moved to the South, mainly in North and South Carolina. It was profitable and the second largest textile company in the U.S., with fifty-three plants and 36,000 workers. The workers were concentrated in three main centers of operation.

For the campaign the TWUA united with the Industrial Union Department of the national labor confederation, American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). The campaign began in the summer of 1963 by placing about two dozen organizers in the two states.

J.P. Stevens responded with illegal tactics such as firing, coercing and intimidating pro-union workers. The company also went to the National Labor Relations Board to stop the union effort, then appealed eventually to federal courts. Stevens officials gave speeches and distributed letters and pamphlets to each employee preaching the dangers of a union, claiming that unionization would destroy communities because it would create a climate of conflict and terror.

By 1967 the campaign was making little headway, stuck in legal battles and meeting reluctance among workers to risk being hurt or fired by the company. After long, expensive and time-consuming proceedings, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) found Stevens guilty of breaking the law in 21 out of 22 cases that the union brought before it. The NLRB demanded that the company allow the union access to bulletin boards in the plant, allow direct access to employees within the plant, and own up to its illegal interference.

The company refused. The NLRB then pressed charges against the company for contempt of court.

While the union won legal battles they paid dearly in money and staff time, leaving little energy for actual organizing or an escalation of the marches and rallies that workers joined. The campaign attracted little publicity. By 1976 the TWUA represented only 33,227 employees in 58 plants in the South – with no gains at Stevens.

The union reached a turning point and decided to merge with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW) to make a fresh start. The newly merged union – the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) – had a combined membership of 400,000, new life and a new strategic framework. In the next three years they increased their organizing staff from 26 to 45 and
began to win more significant plant elections in North and South Carolina.

Along with the merger in 1976 they decided to launch a national boycott of J.P. Stevens products. The boycott attracted widespread support within the labor movement and among middle class liberal activists as well. The boycott and its slogan “Don’t sleep with J.P. Stevens” won significant publicity for the first time.

The boycott was joined by the United Presbyterian Church and other faith groups, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights groups, multiple college campus groups, and endorsed by a number of elected officials. In 1978 allies staged “Justice for JP Stevens Workers Day” activities in 74 cities across the U.S.

The ACTWU strategy launched a corporate campaign that included placing pro-labor resolutions on the company’s shareholders meetings while picketing outside. The campaigners located the company’s directors and embarrassed them in public, gaining the resignation of two directors from the board.

The four-year direct action campaign brought CEO Whitney Stevens to the negotiating table in 1980, and an agreement was announced on 19 October. The company agreed to accept contracts at three major locations with union dues check-off and arbitration of disputes. The company further agreed to pay $3,000,000 to the Roanoke Rapids plant’s employees who had not had wage increases despite their 1974 union election win.

In exchange, the ACTWU agreed to end its boycott and corporate dimensions of the campaign. They vowed, however, to continue to organize the remaining J.P. Stevens plants and to file grievances with the NLRB for wrong-doing done in the future by the company.

Three years later, on 20 October 1983, the ACTWU ended its J.P. Stevens organizing drive in return for $1.2 million for the union and some workers, as a settlement for the accumulated unfair labor practices cases it had brought to the NLRB.

Whitney Stevens also promised to write a letter to the NLRB General Counsel pledging zero tolerance for unjust labor practices.

While the textile workers and their union won a significant victory after two decades of struggle, they were unable to continue their momentum in the 1980s because the Presidency of Ronald Reagan – begun in 1980 – helped lead a renewed offensive against the labor movement in the U.S.

Research Notes

Influences:
Not known

Sources:


Additional Notes:
Led by the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), which merged with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) in 1976 to become ACTWU

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
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