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"Don't Sleep With Stevens!": The J. P. Stevens Boycott and Social Activism in the 1970s

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On 30 November 1978 thousands of people from across the United States took part in "Justice for J. P. Stevens' Workers Day." In seventy-four cities activities such as rallies, marches, press conferences, film premieres, and leafleting were held in support of a union boycott against a giant textile company that had persistently shown its willingness to violate the law rather than recognize its workers' right to organize. In New York City more than 3000 demonstrators marched in front of the company's midtown headquarters as part of the nationwide day of protest that was endorsed by Governor Hugh L. Carey and the City Council. In Los Angeles hundreds of trade unionists and their supporters rallied in front of City Hall, while in Indianapolis protesters gathered at the local Hilton Hotel for a "hard times luncheon" of ham and beans that was designed to express solidarity with the company's low-paid workers. Finding that the hotel's table cloths were made by Stevens, enraged protesters ripped the fabrics from the tables and dumped them in a pile on the floor. Activities were also held in many smaller cities; in Albany, New York, for example, a rally was addressed by Secretary of State and Lieutenant Governor-elect Mario Cuomo, who told consumers "to shun the products of J. P. Stevens as you would shun the fruit of an unholy tree." Across the country, protesters carried signs urging consumers to steer clear of the company's sheets, a staple part of its textile business. Americans, they insisted, should not "sleep" with the products of a company that had repeatedly violated labor laws and was guilty of racial and sexual discrimination against its workers.[1]

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[1] For coverage of the Justice Day protests see Del Mileski to General Officers and Leadership, 8 Jan. 1979, "Status Reports II," folder, box 401, 6, 13, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union Papers, held at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell

The Justice Day protests spotlighted the high profile of the J. P. Stevens campaign in 1970s America. Across the country, a wide range of Americans were outraged by the conduct of a company that the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations) branded "the nation's No. 1 labor law violator."[2] Between 1965 and 1976, in fact, the company had been cited for violating the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in fifteen different cases, paying out around $1.3 million in back pay to approximately 300 workers. Feeling that they could not allow such lawlessness to go unchallenged, in 1976 the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (ACTWU) had launched a major boycott with the full backing of the national AFL-CIO. By November 1978 the boycott had attracted support from a broad cross-section of opinion, including major civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In addition, the largest women's organization in the country and a variety of church and senior citizens' bodies all lent their backing. The campaign also ignited student activism, with students at seventy-five universities and colleges setting up boycott support groups.[3] Political help was not lacking either, as the boycott was endorsed by several US governors, fifty-six US representatives, and a range of senators. High-profile supporters included actress Jane Fonda, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, author Michael Harrington, and ABC sports commentator Myron Cope. The wide range of support buoyed the confidence of union leaders, who had been trying to organize J. P. Stevens since 1963. Citing the backing of a wide range of allies, ACTWU President Murray Finley boasted in 1977 that his union would "win" their long struggle against J. P. Stevens.[4]

Despite this optimism, the boycott was a major undertaking; the second-largest textile firm in the nation, Stevens employed over 44,000 people, the bulk of them in its seventy-four Southern plants.[5] Never before had an

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University, hereafter ACTWU Papers – Cornell. Mileski's report includes a full range of clippings on the Justice Day protests, including reports from the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. For the "Don't Sleep with Stevens" slogan, see "Don't Sleep with Stevens Tonight," nd., "Materials which accompanied Status Reports," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[2] 1978 ACTWU Convention Proceedings, 200.

[3] "Boycott of Textile Company Supported at 75 Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 Nov. 1978, clipping in untitled folder, box 58, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union – Southern Regional Office Papers, held at the Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, hereafter ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

[4] ACTWU General Executive Board Minutes, 1 March–4 March 1977, "GEB March Meeting," folder, box 124, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 23.

[5] "J. P. Stevens Annual Report 1977," 15 Dec. 1977, "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc. Annual Reports 1967–1981," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 9; 171 NLRB No. 163 at 1206.

American union attempted a boycott against a company of this size. Union leaders, however, persisted because they consistently argued that if they could organize Stevens they would then make other gains in the traditionally non-union South. As an aide of AFL-CIO President George Meany commented in 1976, "Stevens is the key to the South."[6] Since the labor upsurge of the 1930s, repeated union efforts to organize the South had fallen short, encouraging firms such as Stevens to move to the region in order to avoid unionization. The Stevens fight became a test case of labor's efforts to organize the fast-growing "Sunbelt" region and stem rising corporate opposition to unionism. As AFL-CIO official James Sala commented, "As long as we've got J. P. Stevens, we'll never really succeed in organizing the South. Not because of textiles, but because of the example it sets for this kind of resistance."[7]

In recent years, there has been an explosion of scholarship in Southern labor history, much of it concentrating on workers in textiles, the South's largest industry.[8] Most of this scholarship, however, has concentrated on the

[6] Quoted in A. H. Raskin, "J. P. Stevens: Labor's Big Domino," *New York Times*, 15 Aug. 1976, Sect. 3, 1, 11, quotation on 11. Former TWUA President Sol Stetin similarly told the union's executive board in October 1979 that "the struggle to organize Stevens will lead to a breakthrough throughout the south." ACTWU General Executive Board Minutes, 10 Oct. 1979, "10/10/79," folder, box 854, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 15.

[7] Sala quoted in David Leonhardt, "James Finley, Textile Executive, Dies at 86," *New York Times*, 10 April 2003, printed from NYTimes.com

[8] The growth of Southern labor history has been particularly influenced by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), which effectively challenged the stereotype of the passive Southern worker, instead showing how Southern textile workers in the early twentieth century effectively crafted a distinctive culture of their own. Other important works include James A. Hodges, *New Deal Labor Policy and the Southern Cotton Textile Industry, 1933–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986); David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880–1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). For a selection of recent scholarship see Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940–1995* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997); Glenn T. Eskew, ed., *Labor in the Modern South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001). Case studies of textile communities include Douglas Flamming, *Creating The Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884–1984* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Daniel J. Clark, *Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); G. C. Waldrep III, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community: Spartanburg County, South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Michelle Brattain, *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

pre-World War II era. Despite the high profile of the Stevens campaign, it has failed to receive very much attention from historians. At the time, the campaign was covered well by investigative journalists such as Mimi Conway, but since it ended scholarship has been limited. Some scholars have explored the story of Crystal Lee Sutton, the Stevens worker whose story inspired the 1979 Oscar-winning film *Norma Rae*.[9] In addition, the campaign has been briefly summarized in a useful overview article by James A. Hodges. The boycott itself has been neglected, and little is known about why it was launched or how effective it was.[10] Newly available archival sources, including the union's own records of its boycott activities, now make it possible to provide a much fuller picture of a boycott that ACTWU Secretary-Treasurer Jack Sheinkman termed "the social and economic force of the Seventies."[11]

The 1970s have usually been viewed, in the words of one history textbook, as "generally quiescent."[12] The activism that the boycott encouraged certainly shows that not all social protest died when the 1960s ended. Writing in the *New York Times*, Nancy Nappo asserted that campus activism in support of the Stevens boycott challenged the conventional view of the 1970s college student as "grade-conscious, career-oriented, and politically moderate to conservative."[13] The student protesters, added the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, had revived "a spirit reminiscent of the 60's."[14] The women's movement also grew considerably during the 1970s, and many

[9] Mimi Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise: A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979). Conway's book concentrates on Stevens workers in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. On Crystal Lee Sutton see Robert Brent Toplin, "Norma Rae: Unionism in an Age of Feminism," *Labor History* 36 (Spring 1995), 282–98; James A. Hodges, "The Real Norma Rae," in Zieger, ed., *Southern Labor in Transition*, 251–72. On the broader significance of the film see also Gay P. Zieger and Robert H. Zieger, "Unions on the Silver Screen: A Review Essay," *Labor History* 23 (Winter 1982), 67–78.

[10] James A. Hodges, "J. P. Stevens and the Union: Struggle for the South," in *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*, ed. Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 53–64, 246–49. Hodges himself notes in his article that "No good published study of the boycott strategy exists" (248).

[11] Sheinkman quoted in Marvin Klapper, "New Era Looms for Stevens," *Daily News Record*, 8 Oct. 1980, clipping in J. P. Stevens and Company Inc., General Labor, 1980–81," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell. This account chiefly utilizes ACTWU Papers at Cornell University and Georgia State University. Both collections have been little utilized by scholars. The collections, which were deposited recently, are unprocessed and include a great deal of material on the Stevens campaign.

[12] Paul S. Boyer et al., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People: Concise Third Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 705.

[13] Nancy Nappo, "Princeton: Activism is Reborn," *New York Times*, 25 Dec. 1977, Sect. 11, 3, 13.

[14] "Boycott of Textile Company Supported at 75 Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 Nov. 1978, untitled folder, box 58, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

members of the 50,000-strong National Organization for Women (NOW) took part in grassroots activities in support of the Stevens boycott.[15] While civil rights protests generally dropped out of the headlines in the 1970s, some of the veterans of that struggle were also encouraged to get involved in protest again by the Stevens campaign. Toward the end of the boycott, for example, Jibreel Khazan, one of the four men who staged the first sit-in at a Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina in February 1960, joined eighty other demonstrators in a protest at a Woolworth store in Boston. The protesters, who were angered by Woolworth's refusal to support the Stevens boycott, saw the campaign as a continuation of the earlier civil rights fight. "It's essentially the same struggle," commented Rev. Canon Ed Rodman, missionary to minorities for the Massachusetts Episcopal Diocese. "Now it's black people and white people – they're not being allowed to organize. Of course, then it was civil rights. Now it's economic rights."[16]

In many ways the union's campaign against Stevens was a success. In public relations terms, it was a clear victory for ACTWU; the union secured broad backing and a great deal of favorable press coverage. Realizing the growing importance of the media in determining the outcome of labor struggles, the union successfully made J. P. Stevens "a household word," linking the company in the public mind with labor law violations and unfair treatment of its workers.[17] Although the boycott was less successful in economic terms, it did have some impact on the company, forcing cancellations and pushing Stevens to undermine its profitability by selling its products through discount outlets. By the fall of 1980 Stevens was tired of its long fight with ACTWU and agreed to sign a historic agreement in which it recognized the union in all the locations where it had won bargaining rights.

There was, however, a downside. The economic boycott was held back by the difficulties in identifying many of Stevens's products, together with the fact that the majority of these goods were not sold direct to the consumer. While the union did secure some cancellations, many of the large retail firms that ordered from J. P. Stevens refused to bow to union pressure. The union also found that the boycott hurt its ongoing efforts to organize the company's workers, as many of them argued that they would not support an organization that was trying to destroy their jobs. Executives skilfully

[15] Boyer et al., 705.

[16] "From a famous rights sit-in 20 years ago to Hub counter," *Boston Globe*, 25 May 1980, clipping in "Woolworth/Woolco," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[17] "Report to the IUD Executive Committee on the J. P. Stevens Campaign," Oct. 1977, "History of J. P. Stevens Campaign up to 1977," folder, box 366, *ACTWU* Papers – Cornell.

encouraged these fears, using the boycott as an opportunity to bolster their claims that unions threatened job security. The union also found that the boycott exacerbated regional tensions that had hindered its previous efforts; most of the support for the campaign came from outside the South, encouraging many Southerners to see the Northern-based ACTWU as an outside force that did not represent their true interests. In the years after the 1980 settlement the rapid economic decline of the textile industry also hurt the union and prevented it from capitalizing on the Stevens breakthrough as it had anticipated at the time, when the industry still dominated the Southern economy and few anticipated the scale of its subsequent collapse.

The Stevens campaign represented a major effort by textile unionists to make progress in the historically non-union Southern textile industry. Since the late nineteenth century Northern firms had been lured south by the prospect of cheaper wages and the absence of unions. From 1894 to 1927 the average Southern textile wage was around 40 percent lower than in the rest of the US. In addition, weaker labor laws enabled Southern mill owners to make their employees work longer hours than their Northern counterparts. The South's share of textile production gradually increased as a result, and by the eve of World War II the region was home to over 70 percent of the operating spindles in the southern cotton textile industry.[18] After World War II the industry continued to move south, undermining textile unions who had made major progress in signing up Northern workers in the 1930s and 1940s but had been unable to extend their presence in Dixie. By the time of the start of the Stevens campaign, for instance, less than 10 percent of textile workers in the Carolinas were organized, compared to 37 percent of their counterparts in New England and 46 percent in the mid-Atlantic region.[19] As the industry shifted south, the membership of the Textile Workers' Union of America (TWUA) declined precipitously; in 1948 the union had 348,000 members, but by 1962 this had fallen to just 135,000.[20]

Textile union leaders realized that they had to make real breakthroughs in the South if they were to survive as an organization. Prior to the early 1960s

[18] Hodges, *New Deal Labor Policy*, 10–13.

[19] "Total Production Worker Employment in the Textile Industry and Workers Covered by Union Agreements, by state," March 1964, "Political Notes, 1962–63," folder, MSS 396, box 661, Textile Workers Union of America Papers, held at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, hereafter TWUA Papers.

[20] "TWUA Membership and Workers Covered by TWUA Agreements, 1946–74," 21 May 1976, "TWUA Membership and Workers Covered by TWUA Agreements, 1946–74 (5/21/76)," folder, MSS 97–196, box 3, TWUA Papers.

all of their efforts had been bitterly resisted by employers. In the immediate postwar period, the CIO's much-hyped "Operation Dixie" placed a major emphasis on textiles yet netted only a handful of new members.[21] In the 1950s the union suffered a string of defeats, including a failed general strike in 1951 and a bruising and violent walkout at the Harriet-Henderson Cotton Mills in Henderson, North Carolina in 1958–59.[22] Any organizing gains that the TWUA succeeded in making were usually at small firms and failed to lead to wider gains. Realizing this, union leaders argued that they had to organize a large, pattern-setting company. In 1963 they selected Stevens, arguing that the firm's plants were nicely located in several "clusters" in the Carolinas. The company had dealt with the union in the North but in the wake of World War II it had moved the bulk of its operations to the South, setting up unorganized facilities. In addition, CEO Robert T. Stevens had served as Secretary of the Army between 1953 and 1955, being famously grilled by anti-communist Senator Joseph McCarthy during 1954 hearings into alleged communist influence in the department he headed. Union leaders reasoned that the company's Northern origins, together with Robert T. Stevens's tenure in high office, would ensure that their organizing efforts would not be unduly resisted.[23]

They could not have been more wrong. Robert T. Stevens, an independently minded New Englander who took great pride in a business that his ancestors had first set up in 1813, strongly disliked union efforts to target his company. He also insisted that union demands would hurt his company's ability to prosper in the intensely competitive textile industry. The indignant CEO vigorously resisted the organizing campaign, with scores of union supporters being discharged or intimidated into repudiating the TWUA. "Unexpectedly," wrote journalist Walter Guzzardi, Jr., "the thought of union organizers at the company gates turned mild-mannered Robert Stevens into Fighting Bob, and management decided to do

[21] Hodges estimates that Operation Dixie secured the TWUA only 19,805 new members. See Hodges, "J. P. Stevens," 54; Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor.*

[22] For the 1951 strike see Timothy J. Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?: The TWUA in the South, 1945–1955* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 99–176; Clete Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretative History of Textile Unionism in the United States* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2001), 208–20. For the Harriet-Henderson strike see Daniel J. Clark, *Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Daniel, 251–53.

[23] Jerome Campbell, "The head of the house of J. P. Stevens," *Modern Textiles Magazine*, Jan. 1960, 21, 22, 41, clipping in "Stevens J. P. and Company, General Labor, 1948–65," folder, box 678; "Committee to Work on Selecting Target for IUD Organizing Drive," 24 April 1963; and John Chupka to William Pollock, 13 Feb. 1963, both in "Decision to Begin J. P. Stevens Campaign – 1963," folder, box 627, both in ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

battle."[24] Between 1963 and 1975, the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) filed fifteen suits on behalf of Stevens workers and brought five contempt citations against the company. Stevens, in the words of Circuit Court Judge John Brown, had engaged in "a massive multi-state campaign to prevent unionization of its southern plants." The company, added NLRB Trial Examiner Thomas Ricci, "was determined to root out the union adherents throughout its many plants ... the unfair labor practices found up to this writing have been 'massive and deliberate.'"[25] No strangers to vigorous opposition, textile union leaders claimed that at Stevens they had been met by "an anti-union campaign unparalleled in modern American labor history."[26] The targeting of Stevens, *Fortune* magazine later concluded, had turned out to be "one of the most felicitous mistakes in labor's history."[27]

By the early 1970s Stevens held the upper hand in the battle with the union. The company's tactics of firing and intimidating union supporters clearly worked, as one campaign after another collapsed. In every location where the union called elections, it lost. The length of time it took for discharged workers to secure back pay was such that by the time they actually received the money it was little more than a pyrrhic victory. As the company repeatedly appealed unfavorable NLRB and lower court rulings, it took more than three years for the first wave of illegally discharged Stevens employees to be called back to their jobs.[28] By the early 1970s textile union leaders were considering calling off the campaign, but decided to make a final effort to try and organize Stevens's large complex of plants in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. Drawing heavily on support from black workers, the union won an election victory that rescued the campaign. Following the vote, however, the company refused to sign a contract, and organizing efforts at other plants continued to fall short.[29]

[24] Walter Guzzardi, Jr., "How the Union Got the Upper Hand on J. P. Stevens," *Fortune*, 19 June 1978, 86–89, 91, 94, 98, quotation on 87; "J. P. Stevens Magazine Articles, 1978–79," folder, box 366, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[25] Testimony of the Textile Workers Union of America Before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Labor–Management Relations, 15 March 1976, "House Subcommittee," folder, box 390, Cornell, 1, 13, quotations on 13; Hodges, "J. P. Stevens," 58.

[26] 1978 ACTWU Convention Proceedings, 200.

[27] Guzzardi, 87.

[28] "J. P. Stevens Acts to Reinstate 69," *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 1967, in "Stevens, J. P. and Co., General Labor, 1966–71," folder, box 678, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[29] Paul Swaity interview, 15 Nov. 1978, TWUA Oral History Project, TWUA Papers, tape 3, side 1; George Perkel interview, 25 and 28 Sept. 1978 and 16 Nov. 1978, TWUA Oral History Project, TWUA Papers, tape 2, side 2; Testimony of the Textile Workers Union of America Before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor,

The union began to consider launching a boycott against J. P. Stevens several years before it actually did so. Buoyed by the Roanoke Rapids victory, TWUA leaders were clearly committed to continuing the fight, yet they were also aware that they had to find a new technique of exerting real pressure on the company. A major cause of the union's decision to launch the boycott was its recognition that it could not strike against Stevens successfully. The textile maker had plants spread out across the South and could easily transfer production between them in the event of a labor dispute. The union also noted that it had won the Roanoke Rapids election with only 54 percent of the vote, and that the recession of the mid-1970s had caused widespread layoffs across the textile belt.[30] As such, the company could easily recruit strike-breakers if they needed to. Since the 1930s the union's efforts to conduct strikes in the South had been disastrous, as companies usually recruited strike-breakers with the full support of local law enforcement officials. TWUA Southern director Scott Hoyman remembered that Stevens officials even taunted him to take them on in a strike: "Stevens had kept saying, 'Why don't you strike, Mr Hoyman?' We said, 'We don't want a strike' ... They would have loved it if we had gone out on strike."[31] As striking would be ineffective and the company showed no signs of changing, the "only real alternative," explained TWUA President Sol Stetin, was "a massive national boycott."[32]

Previous boycotts also influenced the union's decision. In the 1960s and early 1970s the boycott emerged as a weapon capable of creating public pressure against companies that otherwise refused to recognize organized labor. A mass boycott of table grapes in the 1960s attracted support for impoverished California farm workers from many liberals otherwise disillusioned with the labor movement. In 1973 the TWUA also launched a successful boycott against Oneita Knitting Mills, a Northern company that ran two textile plants in a rural part of eastern South Carolina. Effectively

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Subcommittee on Labor-Management Relations, 15 March 1976, "House Subcommittee," folder, box 390, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 45–46.

[30] George Perkel to President Stetin, 24 Dec. 1974, "Stevens J. P. and Company General Labor, 1972–74," folder, box 678, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[31] Scott Hoyman interview with author on 6 Nov. 1995 in Summerville, South Carolina. For the difficulties of striking successfully in the South, see Daniel, 251–52; Minchin, 69–98.

[32] "Report to the IUD Executive Committee on the J. P. Stevens Campaign," Oct. 1977, "History of J. P. Stevens Campaign up to 1977," folder, box 366, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 7; Sol Stetin to Edward T. Hanley, 3 March 1976, "J. P. Stevens," file, fiche 5 of 6, fiche box 7, Murray Finley Papers, held at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, hereafter Finley Papers.

publicizing the low wages of a workforce that was predominantly African American and female, the union secured widespread publicity and the backing of a range of women's and civil rights groups, including NOW. As a result Oneita eventually settled with the union.[33]

As well as being an effective public relations weapon, boycotts could clearly hurt companies economically. In 1972–73 a boycott launched by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' of America (ACWA) against the Farah Clothing Company affected the firm's sales and pushed them to reluctantly recognize the union. The Farah boycott had a particular influence on the launching of the Stevens boycott. In the mid-1970s TWUA leaders sought a merger with the ACWA because they felt that it had experience conducting a successful boycott. In merging with the larger ACWA, TWUA leaders also wanted to create a bigger union to take on J. P. Stevens. At the merger convention, AFL-CIO President George Meany swore in the new officers and pledged the "complete, total, all-out support" of his federation to a consumer boycott. "This is not a fight of the Stevens workers alone," he declared.[34]

Union strategists carried out a great deal of preparation prior to launching a boycott. A chief concern was the "potential effectiveness" of a boycott, as strategists quickly established that J. P. Stevens made a wide range of non-consumer products.[35] In comparison to Farah, which sold its goods direct to the consumer under a recognizable brand name, Stevens only sold around a third of its products in this way. An economic boycott was also held back by legal restrictions. Boycotting activities could easily violate various sections of the NLRA, especially if union agents themselves put pressure on companies not to buy a firm's products. Strategists noted that in the closing days of the Farah boycott, NLRB General Counsel Peter Nash was proposing to issue a complaint and seek a federal court injunction against the ACWA on the grounds that visits by union agents combined with educational picketing outside stores constituted a violation of the NLRA. Such a violation would

[33] Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions* (1986; third edition, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 215; Sol Stetin interview, 18 July 1977, 13–14 March 1978, 25 July 1978, and 16 Nov. 1978, TWUA Oral History Project, TWUA Papers, tape 10, side 2.

[34] Michelle Haberland, "Women's Work: The Apparel Industry in the United States South, 1937–1980" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 2001), 144–50; Daniel, 274–75; Meany quoted in Bert Beck, "Manuscript: A History of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union," "Burt Beck Manuscript 201–316," folder, box 8, MSS 97–196, TWUA Papers, 236–38, quotation on 238.

[35] Howard D. Samuel to Murray H. Finley, 6 March 1975, "J. P. Stevens Correspondence," file, fiche 1 of 7, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

expose the union to an injunction and a damage action. Aware of this, the Stevens boycott aimed to concentrate on activities with less legal risk, such as media publicity, handbilling to consumers of the company's products, and "non-coercive appeals" to retailers.[36]

Realizing the difficulties of conducting an economic boycott against Stevens, the union concentrated most of its efforts on a publicity campaign designed to isolate the company and damage its image. For more than a decade the union had won one legal victory after another but found that Stevens remained willing to break the law in order to defeat organizing. Lacking national awareness of their efforts, there was little pressure on the company to change. As a result, the union launched the boycott largely as an effort to communicate their case to a national audience, arguing that the negative publicity would push the company to change course. As ACTWU Secretary-Treasurer Jack Sheinkman put it, "The boycott was launched to stir the American conscience."[37] The ultimate aim of the boycott was to create pressure on the firm's managers that would force it to moderate its anti-unionism and sign a contract at Roanoke Rapids. "The goal of the consumer boycott," asserted the union, "is to awaken J. P. Stevens to its obligation to stop coercing and threatening its workers, to end the climate of fear so that elections can be held fairly, and to bargain in good faith when its workers vote to bargain collectively through a union of their own choice."[38]

Boycott strategists developed a wide range of publicity materials to accomplish their goals. Realizing that Stevens's record of lawlessness placed the union in a strong moral position, much of their material, particularly when it was directed at church groups, concentrated on the company's labor law violations. "Since 1964," noted one key appeal, "the NLRB has found J. P. Stevens guilty of illegal anti-union activities on thirteen separate occasions and three additional cases are currently pending." The company had established "a persistent pattern of flagrant and massive law violations" that the NLRB had been unable to stop. As a result, the workers' right to

[36] Arthur M. Goldberg and Irving J. Alter, "Legal Implications Incident to the Stevens Boycott," 17 Sept. 1976, "J. P. Stevens 1976," folder, box 647, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[37] Sheinkman quoted in Marvin Klapper, "New Era Looms for Stevens," *Daily News Record*, 8 Oct. 1980, clipping in "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc., General Labor, 1980–81," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell. See also George Perkel to President Stetin, 24 Dec. 1974, "Stevens, J. P. and Co., General Labor, 1972–4," folder, box 678, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[38] Quotation in "The Struggle for Economic Justice at J. P. Stevens," nd, "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports," file, fiche 8 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers. See also "Pressure Program to Get Contracts at J. P. Stevens, Roanoke Rapids, N.C.," 4 Aug. 1975, "J. P. Stevens July–Dec. 1975," folder, box 647, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

organize had become a "hollow promise." Publicity also emphasized that workers desperately needed a union. Their wages were low – "some 31% below the national manufacturing average" – and they lacked many fringe benefits common among industrial workers, such as an adequate pension plan and the ability to file grievances.[39]

Prior to launching the boycott, the union also identified other themes that it later used effectively in boycott publicity. Black workers' complaints of racial discrimination were clearly identified. Prior to the 1960s less than 5 percent of Southern textile workers were black, as companies repeatedly argued that their white employees would strike or riot if more African Americans were hired. In the 1960s and 1970s the impact of civil rights laws ensured that blacks made progress into an industry that had traditionally confined them to non-production jobs, yet they still did not have equal access to the best-paying positions. At Stevens, although over 20 percent of the company's workers were black by the late 1970s, they tended to be confined to lower-paying jobs than whites. As late as December 1980, black men at the company's complex of plants in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina with a twelfth-grade education made less than white men with just a first-grade education. The union seized on the issue, publicizing black workers' complaints of unequal treatment. "It's time to end racial discrimination at J. P. Stevens," claimed one boycott flyer.[40]

ACTWU also accused Stevens of discriminating against its female employees. Over 40 percent of Stevens workers were women, but they too were locked out of the best-paying jobs. Again and again, ACTWU's message was that only a union could tackle such deep-rooted discrimination. "We're supposed to get jobs according to seniority," claimed Stevens worker Nadine Buckner. "But its just a joke. There's no way I'll get ahead unless we get organized."[41] The union also used health and safety issues to mobilize

[39] I. W. Abel and Sol Stetin to Representative, 4 Feb. 1976, Untitled folder, box 58, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta. In one widely circulated flyer, the union charged that Stevens was "the nation's most arrogant labor law-breaker." See "Please don't buy J. P. Stevens Products," nd., fiche 3 of 8, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

[40] Timothy J. Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 12–23, 40–42, 146; J. P. Stevens Annual Report 1977, "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc. Annual Reports, 1967–1981," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 10; "Fight racial discrimination at J. P. Stevens," nd, "JPS Citizens Committee," file, fiche 3 of 8, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

[41] Buckner quoted in Gretchen Donart, "Women Working at J. P. Stevens," *Labor Unity*, March 1979, 12–13, clipping in "J. P. Stevens General Labor 1979," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; "Straightening Things Out," 15 Feb. 1977, "Zensen Domei and Stevens Conference," file, fiche 1 of 2, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

support. In particular, they highlighted how many employees suffered from the debilitating occupational disease bysinnosis (brown lung), caused by breathing in excessive amounts of cotton dust, yet industry had consistently fought efforts to secure effective compensation. The union circulated thousands of copies of informative "fact sheets" to religious and political organizations, as well as community-oriented groups. Other boycott flyers effectively summarized the union's case and gave the union a platform for its attention-grabbing "Don't Sleep With Stevens" slogan. The whole effort was designed, as Sol Stetin put it, "to bring the story of J. P. Stevens to as many people as possible."[42]

Running such a broad-ranging publicity campaign was a major undertaking. The boycott campaign was in fact coordinated by thirty-one paid personnel; five were based at boycott headquarters in New York, the rest in twenty-seven field offices. These staff began to build support for their efforts at the local level by enlisting the help of both individuals and organizations. Staff set up boycott committees in many major cities, drawing on support from civic and religious leaders. In addition, representatives of labor unions, civil rights groups, and feminist organizations also served on many committees. They helped to organize community outreach events, in addition to carrying out leafleting, petitioning, and store visits.[43]

Women's groups responded well to the union's claims that Stevens was a lawless company with no respect for workers' rights. Following approaches by boycott staff, several women's groups working within religious organizations endorsed ACTWU's fight. In April 1978 the Women's Division of the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church backed ACTWU's effort, citing the workers' right to collective bargaining. Representing about fourteen million women nationwide, the Executive Committee of the National Council of Catholic Women also gave their support. Both Methodist and Catholic women organized local actions such

[42] Stetin quoted in Sol Stetin to TWUA Executive Council and Staff, 11 Feb. 1976, untitled folder, box 58, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta. For the union's use of the brown-lung issue, see "Fact Sheet: J. P. Stevens and Occupational Health and Safety," nd., "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports," file, fiche 2 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers. For the effective use of the "Don't sleep With Stevens" slogan see Del Mileski to General Officers and Leadership, 16 Aug. 1978, "Stevens Boycott 1978," folder, box 33, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta; "Don't Sleep with Stevens Tonight," nd., "Materials which accompanied Status Reports," box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[43] Howard D. Samuel to Murray H. Finley et al., 8 Sept. 1976, "Status Reports I," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; James D. Finley to All Stevens Employees, 31 Jan. 1977, untitled folder, box 33, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta; "Report to the IUD Executive Committee on the J. P. Stevens Campaign," Oct. 1977, "History of J. P. Stevens Campaign up to 1977," folder, box 366, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

as store visits, letter-writing, and the collective destruction of credit cards in front of store officials. Many religious groups encouraged their female members to challenge the company's conduct. "We believe," explained the National Coalition of American Nuns, "that those multinational corporations proven guilty, as J. P. Stevens has been on numerous occasions, of depriving American citizens of the benefit of labor law, must be challenged by Christians in the name of the Lord."[44]

The National Organization for Women was a particularly strong boycott supporter. Founded in 1966, NOW was a moderate feminist group that aimed to integrate women "into full participation in the mainstream of society, exercising full privileges and responsibilities in a truly equal partnership with men." NOW claimed to be "the oldest and largest feminist organization in the world," and in the late 1970s it had over 700 chapters in the US and abroad. In June 1977 the group passed a resolution in support of the boycott, asking its members to solicit support from other feminist organizations. In October 1978 a second resolution supported the workers' right to organize, endorsed an international boycott of the company's products, and called on its members to participate in local activities to place pressure on the textile firm.[45]

NOW supported the boycott for a number of reasons. Like many women's groups, its leaders noted that nearly half of the company's workers were women and claimed that they faced "massive discrimination" in the mills. Citing statistics showing that unions raised the wages of female workers, NOW argued that organizing would help overcome this discrimination. Noting the prevalence of cotton dust in the company's mills, the group were also concerned with improving the industry's health and safety record. As women were the "primary consumers" of the firm's products, NOW leaders also felt that the boycott offered an opportunity to work with other feminist organizations in "this important battle for justice, equality and workers' rights."[46]

[44] "Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church," 9 April 1978; "National Assembly of Women Religious," nd.; and "Statement of the Board of Directors of the National Coalition of American Nuns," March 1977, all in "Materials which accompanied Status Reports," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; Del Mileski to General Officers and Leadership, 8 Jan. 1979, "Status Reports II," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 10.

[45] "NOW Protest Against J. P. Stevens," 19 July 1977; and "National Organization for Women," nd, both in "Materials which Accompanied Status Reports," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[46] "Resolution in Support of the Boycott of J. P. Stevens Products," 29 April 1977, "Materials which accompanied Status Reports," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

Many NOW branches, particularly in the large Northern cities, placed pressure on department stores to sever their relationship with J. P. Stevens. Posing as local shoppers, NOW members went into stores, located Stevens products, and asked that they be removed from sale. Many of these protests were as much designed to generate publicity and awareness as they were to get Stevens products taken off the shelves. In a similar vein, in July 1977 NOW's New York chapter also staged a street theater on Seventh Avenue in front of Madison Square Garden that culminated in a burning of Stevens sheets. Branch members also tried to get meetings with store managers in order to persuade them to change their position. In the summer of 1977, for instance, a delegation of members from the Brooklyn NOW, together with women from a variety of church groups, met with managers of A&S stores to try and persuade them to support the boycott. Although A&S executives ultimately refused to back down, the NOW representatives were satisfied that they had convinced them of the depth of women's opposition to its stocking J. P. Stevens goods.[47]

In March 1978 a wide variety of women's groups met in Washington, DC in order to organize the National Women's Committee to Support J. P. Stevens Workers, an umbrella group to harness women's activism behind the boycott. In all, thirty national women's groups attended the meeting; they included the National Women's Party, the Women's Equity Action League, the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Consumer League, and United Methodist Women. NOW President Eleanor C. Smeal told the meeting that "the Stevens boycott so ties in with everything that the women's movement is doing that it is part and parcel of it." In particular the campaign gave feminist organizations the opportunity to refute criticisms that they were a middle-class movement that did not tackle bread-and-butter issues. "The guts of the feminist movement," asserted Smeal, "is the economic issue. It is about the economic equality and economic survival of women." The NOW leader also linked the Stevens campaign with the fight to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, claiming that both fights centered on the conservative South. Firms like Stevens, she explained, opposed the amendment precisely because it would bolster the drive for equal pay for men and women doing the same jobs.[48]

[47] "Action Alert," nd; and "NOW Protest Against J. P. Stevens," 19 July 1977, both in "Materials which Accompanied Status Reports," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; Carol Somplatsky-Jarman to Del Mileski, 20 Aug. 1979, "Status Reports III," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[48] "National Women's Committee to Support J. P. Stevens Workers: Founding Meeting," 17 March 1978; "NOW Boycotts J. P. Stevens: Update," nd; Smeal quoted in James

At the conference, women's groups mapped out an action plan to place further pressure on Stevens. As women were the major purchasers of bedding and towels, the company's staple products, they tried to exert consumer pressure on firms who still stocked Stevens goods. In the spring of 1980, for instance, the National Women's Committee wrote to Woolworth Chairman Edward F. Gibbons. "Members of the National Women's Committee to support J. P. Stevens Workers have been active for over two years now supporting the struggle of the J. P. Stevens workers to achieve decent working conditions and wages which will allow their families to live in human decency," they noted. "As the major purchasers of domestic products we are using our consumer power to help bring justice to the workplace at J. P. Stevens." Despite this appeal, Woolworth continued to be a major stockist of Stevens products, asserting that it had to remain neutral in labor disputes.[49]

At the same time, many women also wrote on an individual basis. In April 1979 Mary C. Steele wrote to Richway Store's boss Ralph Lazarus that J. P. Stevens flouted both labor and health and safety laws. "Why should I buy J. P. Stevens products sold at Richway?" she asked. New York resident Joy Chute also argued that Lazarus should not condone Stevens's lawlessness by stocking their products. "I am not 'a special interest group,'" she claimed. "I am a citizen who believes in fair labor practices, and I feel that the Stevens Company has consistently violated these." Other women cited Stevens's willingness to break the law, together with its record of discrimination against women and blacks, as compelling proof that the company needed to be isolated by the rest of the corporate community.[50]

Civil rights groups, including the NAACP, CORE, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), also strongly supported the boycott. The union went to considerable effort to mobilize the civil rights community behind its fight with Stevens. Boycott material made much of the discrimination faced by African Americans who worked for the textile giant, linking it with the company's broader record of lawlessness. As one fact

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M. Shevis, "Women's Coalition Joins Stevens Fight," *AFL-CIO News*, 25 March 1978, all in "Materials which accompanied Status Reports," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[49] Eleanor Smeal et al. to Edward F. Gibbons, 13 March 1980, "Woolworth/Woolco," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[50] Mary C. Steele to Ralph Lazarus, 6 April 1979; Joy Chute to Ralph Lazarus, 13 April 1979; Norma Chandler to Ralph Lazarus, 6 April 1979, all in "Letters to Lazarus," folder, box 400, ACTWU Papers – Cornell. See also Emma I. Darnell to Ralph Lazarus, 16 May 1979, "Letters to Lazarus," folder; and Cheryl R. Huff to Allen Questrom, 16 Nov. 1979, "Rich's," folder, both in box 400, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

sheet claimed, "Hiring on the basis of race, discriminating against blacks in layoffs and recalls, paying black males substantially less than white males – that's only part of the appalling Stevens record." Testimony from individual workers was used to illustrate the barriers facing black employees who wanted access to the better-paying jobs. "I asked why I couldn't get the same thing the white man was getting," claimed Robert Mallory. "And I never got an answer whatsoever out of all of them."[51]

Coretta Scott King, the wife of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, was one of ACTWU's highest-profile allies. In the late 1970s Mrs. King expressed her support for the union to both the company's stockholders' meeting and the union's convention, citing her late husband's support of unionization as one of the most effective ways of lifting blacks out of poverty and providing them a fairer share of the economic pie. "The outcome of this struggle," she claimed, "will determine whether millions of Southern workers, black and white, win their right to union representation and to a fair and equitable share of the wealth that production creates."[52]

Scott King expressed a broader concern of civil rights activists in 1970s America. By this time, African Americans had secured legal equality but they were more aware than ever before of their continuing economic inequality. Black income stubbornly lagged behind that of whites, and activists increasingly felt that they needed to tackle the causes of black poverty in a more concerted fashion.[53] This continuing economic inequality was a major concern of Southerners for Economic Justice (SEJ), a lobbying group that the union set up in December 1976. SEJ was headed by prominent figures from the African American community, including Georgia State Senator Julian Bond, former Student Non-Violent Co-Ordinating Committee (SNCC) Chair John Lewis, Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, and NAACP Southern Director Ruby Hurley. Working with community and church groups, SEJ conducted a "vigorous education campaign" to build support in Dixie for the boycott. Reflecting the involvement of former civil rights activists, SEJ consistently linked the Stevens struggle to the civil rights

[51] "Fight racial discrimination at J. P. Stevens," "J. P. Stevens Citizens' Committee," file, fiche 3 of 8, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

[52] 1978 ACTWU Convention Proceedings, 121. For King's address to the 1977 J. P. Stevens stockholders' meeting, see Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 136.

[53] See, for example, the increasing emphasis that civil rights group Southern Regional Council gave to economic inequality in the 1970s. "Southern Regional Council: Program for the '70's," Nov. 1972, folder 9, box 3370, Emory Via Papers, held at the Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, 1.

movement. "The goal of economic justice," they asserted, was the South's "next great challenge following the civil rights era."[54]

The union was also successful in attracting support from the student community for the boycott, especially on Northern campuses. Students responded sympathetically to ACTWU's depiction of Stevens as a corporate outlaw. At Princeton University, members of the J. P. Stevens Boycott/Princeton Support Group waged a wide-ranging on-campus campaign. In October 1976 they demonstrated against the dual role of R. Manning Brown, Chairman of Princeton's Board of Trustees and also a Stevens board member. The following spring they succeeded in preventing an on-campus visit by Stevens president Whitney Stevens, who planned to address a closed gathering of the Princeton Club about the dispute. Members of the Support Group objected, insisting that the top executive should take part in an on-campus public discussion. If he refused, they promised to protest about his visit. Facing this pressure, officials of the Club cancelled, claiming that "they didn't want their members subjected to that kind of thing."[55]

Students at other Northern universities were also active in support of the boycott. In April 1977 a support committee at New York University (NYU) organized a teach-in where guests heard talks by several Stevens workers and were shown a film about the dispute. The NYU Support Group also engaged in a wide variety of other activities, including leafleting and a letter-writing campaign to try to ensure that none of the firm's sheets were used in the university's dorms.[56] Similar activities took place at a wide range of other universities; at the University of Illinois, for instance, volunteers circulated literature and carried out surveys to determine how extensively company products were used on campus, while at Cornell University the boycott drew a large amount of support, especially during an education week where literature tables were set up in busy student centers. Teach-ins were held at a number of schools, including Columbia, Rutgers, and Princeton; most

[54] Quotations from "Southerners for Economic Justice," nd, "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports," file, fiche 3 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers. See also Wayne King, "Southern Leaders Form Group to Support Stevens Textile Workers," *New York Times*, 18 Dec. 1976, "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports," file, fiche 3 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers; Howard D. Samuel to General Officers and Leadership," 1 Nov. 1976, "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports" file, fiche 8 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

[55] Howard D. Samuel to General Officers and Leadership, 1 Nov. 1976, "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports" file, fiche 8 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers; Quotation in "For Immediate Release," nd, "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports" file, fiche 7 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

[56] "J. P. Stevens Workers Need Your Support!" nd; Ann Meyerson and Oliver Rosengart to NYU Faculty, 5 April 1977; and "Summary of Meeting," 30 March 1977, all in "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports" file, fiche 7 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

featured talks by faculty members and former Stevens workers, along with films, songs, and general leafleting. At Stanford University, students organized a major campaign when they discovered that the university was a major owner of Stevens stock. After collecting what they claimed to be "an enormous number" of signatures, boycott supporters pushed the university to back church-supported resolutions on discrimination and the denial of workers' rights. Similar efforts secured results elsewhere. At Harvard and Princeton, student activists secured pledges from official stores to drop Stevens products, while the University of Pittsburgh decided not to purchase the company's goods after pressure from boycott supporters.[57]

The Stevens campaign encouraged other types of student activism, especially at Princeton, where students formed the first, and one of the most active, boycott chapters on a college campus. "I see the boycott as a campus trend," claimed Princeton senior David Salomon. "Vietnam is over, but activism hasn't died. It has simply changed its focus to holding corporations here and abroad accountable for their actions." In the fall of 1977 Princeton students also protested against President Carter's unemployment and immigration policies, organizing a demonstration when Secretary of Labor F. Ray Marshall spoke on campus. Other student groups protested against American trade with apartheid South Africa, lobbied for more rights for Chicano workers within the US, and spoke out against world hunger.[58]

The boycott campaign also received backing from some high-profile media figures. During the football season in the fall of 1979, ABC sports commentator Myron Cope personally visited the top executives of Gimbels after it was found that the store were selling towels waved by fans of the Pittsburgh Steelers, one of the dominant football teams of the decade. At games, fans waved black-and-gold "terrible towels," a practice that Cope had helped to popularize. After the union publicized that Stevens manufactured the black towels, Cope intervened and, following considerable media publicity, Gimbels withdrew the offending items from its shelves. Around the same time, actress Jane Fonda also visited the Gimbels store in Pittsburgh to protest about their continued sale of J. P. Stevens products.

[57] "J. P. Stevens Frontlash Support Activities," 1 Jan.–31 March 1977, "J. P. Stevens Progress Reports" file, fiche 7 of 9, fiche box 7, Finley Papers; "Report on J. P. Stevens Boycott Campus Program," nd, "J. P. Stevens Citizens' Committee" file, fiche 4 of 8, fiche box 7, Finley Papers (quotation); "Boycott of Textile Company Supported at 75 Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 Nov. 1978, untitled folder, box 58, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

[58] Nancy Nappo, "Princeton: Activism is Reborn," *New York Times*, 25 Dec. 1977, Sect. 11, 3, 13, quotation on 13; "Boycott of Textile Company Supported at 75 Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 Nov. 1978, untitled folder, box 58, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

When store managers refused to meet her, the actress leafleted outside and spoke to gathering journalists, resulting in coverage by both CBS and NBC. Stevens was forced to respond with a statement denying that they were anti-union and calling Fonda's involvement in the boycott "ludicrous and misguided."[59]

Capitalizing on the popularity of the 1979 film *Norma Rae*, which was loosely based on the 1973–74 organizing campaign in Roanoke Rapids, the union also sponsored a successful nationwide tour by Crystal Lee Sutton, the worker whose story had inspired the film. In the first half of 1980 Sutton completed a tour of twenty-two North American cities, informing audiences about the real events that had inspired the movie. The union was especially keen to use the film to help its boycott, and a special leaflet entitled "The Real Norma Rae" spread news of its campaign. Press coverage of Sutton's tour was extensive. The former Roanoke Rapids textile worker made an appearance on *Good Morning America* and was interviewed by a range of high-circulation newspapers. Overall, her tour secured fifteen national stories, fifty-seven newspaper feature stories, sixty-three local television appearances, and thirty-nine radio appearances. Media coverage was overwhelmingly positive. "The most remarkable fact about this campaign," wrote public relations consultant Gail Jeffords, who handled Sutton's schedule, "is that there has NOT BEEN ONE SINGLE NEGATIVE STORY at any time since Crystal's appearances began."[60]

In terms of securing publicity and raising public awareness of the campaign, the boycott was a success. ACTWU leaders took pride in the way that their efforts had reached a wide variety of Americans, arguing that this would affect their behavior as consumers. "This campaign," claimed Jack Sheinkman, "has established an awareness factor in the American public's mind and even in those who buy for the department stores – a much greater awareness than was manifested in the Farah campaign."[61] In contrast to Farah, however, which sold the vast majority of its products direct to the consumer, J. P. Stevens made a wide variety of textile goods, many of which were not sold under identifiable brand names. The bulk of the company's

[59] Boycott Report dated 9 Oct. 1979, "Status Reports II," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[60] Hodges, "The Real Norma Rae," 266–67; Gail Jeffords to Murray Finley et al., 30 June 1980, "Kleeper – Public Relations J. P. Stevens" file, fiche 1 of 4, fiche box 7, Finley Papers (original emphasis). For examples of the positive press coverage that Sutton's tour generated see Hodges, "The Real Norma Rae," 265–69.

[61] "Meeting of the General Executive Board," 13–16 June 1977, "GEB June Meeting," folder, box 124, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 17.

income in fact derived from the sale of fabric to other apparel producers. It was impossible to boycott these products, as this would be considered a secondary boycott, which was illegal under the NLRA. Even retail products were not easy to identify, as they were sold under a confusing variety of brand names. In the case of sheets and pillowcases, these alone were branded as Beaut-Blend, Beauticale, Fine Arts, Peanuts, Tastemaker, Utica, and Utica and Mohawk, as well as being produced for designer labels such as Yves St. Laurent and Dinah Shore. In 1976 the company also had around 20,900 accounts, and no one customer made up for more than 5 percent of total sales.[62]

Aware of these problems, Stevens executives repeatedly claimed that the boycott failed to hurt them. In December 1978 the company's annual report to its stockholders asserted that the union's boycott had "not been successful." In 1978 in fact, Stevens's sales were a record $1,651,451,000, a 7 percent increase compared to 1977.[63] Overall, the company's sales rose 16.2 percent in the two years after the boycott began, compared to 12.5 percent in the two years before. In 1979 and 1980 the company continued to enjoy sales growth, reporting gains of 11 percent and 4.5 percent. Earnings per share, however, did fall in the two years after the boycott was launched, but this drop was in line with industry patterns.[64]

It is very difficult to assess the boycott's exact economic impact upon Stevens, especially as the company did not break down its earnings to reflect the profitability of the 34 percent of its products which were targeted by ACTWU. Overall, however, the records of the campaign suggest that the boycott did have some impact on sales. Written in February 1980, one confidential report commissioned by ACTWU leaders found "weakness in the recent performance of Stevens' home furnishings segment," on which the boycott concentrated. Overall, Stevens's home furnishings sales fell from 34 percent of total sales in 1978 to 29 percent in 1979. The report also documented that the number of customer accounts fell from over 20,000 in 1978 to around 16,000 in 1979, confirming that the union's efforts to

[62] George A. Kelly, "The J. P. Stevens Boycott: Is It Having An Effect," 14 May 1979, in "J. P. Stevens," folder, box 104, 23–24; Vera Miller to Burt Beck, 17 Feb. 1978, "ACTWU Boycott on the Financial Condition of the J. P. Stevens Company, 17 Feb. 1978," folder, 17 Feb. 1978, box 456, both in ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[63] "J. P. Stevens Annual Report 1978," 22 Dec. 1978, "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc. Annual Reports, 1967–81," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 1.

[64] "J. P. Stevens Annual Report 1979," 21 Dec. 1979, 2; "J. P. Stevens Annual Report 1980," 22 Dec. 1980, 2, both in "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc. Annual Reports, 1967–81," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; Kelly, 26–27.

persuade private consumers to take their business elsewhere were having some impact.[65]

Concentrating on Stevens's profitability, rather than its sales, undermines some of the company's claims. A 1979 study by Rutgers University student George A. Kelly looked at Stevens's profit margins, derived by dividing net profits for a yearly period by net sales. Kelly concluded that Stevens was underpricing its product line in order to sustain high levels of sales and earnings. His data showed that Stevens's profitability was well below the industry average. As such, the company seemed to be trying to mask the impact of the boycott by selling its products cheaply and decreasing profitability, a dangerous tactic in the long term because it reduced the income available to executives to reinvest in keeping their operations competitive. In December 1978 Stevens's CEO James Finley admitted that his company had sold many products "substantially below cost" during the 1976–77 period.[66]

Some retail stores proved receptive to the boycott campaign. At Rich's stores in the Atlanta area, union pressure clearly made a difference. Boycott activists initially met with the president of Rich's stores, but he refused to make specific commitments. Following a campaign of leafleting and letter-writing, the company's line changed. "Since Christmas 1977," reported local coordinator Joel Gay, "the amount of JPS products carried by Rich's has been small. Usually one or two designs. Before the stores had many designs." By the summer of 1979 Gay had noted triumphantly that "Richway, the discount division of Rich's, has almost cleared its shelves of JPS products."[67] Working with church, civil rights, and women's groups, the union mounted a widespread letter-writing campaign against Rich's, with many customers promising not to shop at the store until it stopped stocking Stevens products. "I have been a shopper at Rich's for many years," wrote Decatur resident W. J. Ford in one typical letter. "I support the consumer boycott against J. P. Stevens and will not buy J. P. products ... I will inform my friends and neighbors about the consumer boycott, and that Rich's is selling Stevens' products."[68]

Union pressure on Jordan Marsh, a major outlet for Stevens products in New England, also produced results. In a September 1979 meeting with the

[65] Henrietta Dabney to General Officers, 22 Feb. 1980, "J. P. Stevens Boycott, 22 Feb. 1980," folder, box 456, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 1, 8, 9, quotation on 1.

[66] Kelly, 28–29.

[67] Joel Gay to Del Mileski, 21 March 1979 and 31 July 1979, both in "Rich's," folder, box 400, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[68] W. J. Ford to Allen Questrom, nd, "Rich's," folder, box 400, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

Women's Committee for Justice for J. P. Stevens' Workers, Jordan Chairman William Tilburg insisted that he could not cut back on Stevens products while his competitors were continuing to stock them. Repeated petitioning and letter-writing, including approaches to Allied Stores President Thomas Macioce (Allied was Jordan Marsh's parent company), eventually secured results. In a series of meetings with Macioce, the executive made pledges to reduce his company's purchases from Stevens, following through on these commitments by confidentially reporting sales figures to the boycott strategists. Macioce also privately confirmed that Stevens had "lost a lot of main-line department stores" because of the boycott and was trying to sell its products through discount outlets instead.[69]

Many Stevens workers also claimed from their first-hand observations that the boycott was hurting the company. In several plants anti-union employee educational committees (EECs) sprang up, arguing that the boycott was threatening their job security. Although ACTWU leaders dismissed these workers as little more than management stooges, their willingness to claim that the boycott was effective was in direct contradiction to the company's blasé dismissal of ACTWU's efforts. In March 1977 several Stevens employees commented to CBS reporter Mike Wallace that the boycott was having an impact. "With the boycott, my job has been shut down," claimed one educational committee member. "Hundreds of looms standing in there. It doesn't look good at all. I think the union should help us sell our products instead of boycotting our products." Although these workers may have blamed the boycott for curtailments that might have occurred anyway, their concerns were deep-rooted and were based on first-hand experience of what was actually taking place in the plants.[70]

Workers' fears that the boycott was threatening their job security also highlighted the negative impact that the effort had on organizing. In launching the boycott, the union was aware that it could hurt their ongoing drive for new members. At a meeting in June 1976 former ACWA officer Del Mileski acknowledged that any boycott "makes organizing obviously more difficult," yet he insisted that both could be carried on simultaneously. Union strategists insisted that they could overcome unorganized workers'

[69] "Report on the Women's Committee and Jordan Marsh," 20 Sept. 1979; and "Bill Somplatsky-Jarman to Allied Stores Interreligious Delegation Participants," 7 April 1980, both in "Allied," folder, box 400, ACTWU Papers – Cornell (quotation).

[70] Unidentified worker quoted in "Target J. P. Stevens," *Sixty Minutes*, March 1977, videotape copy held at the Kheel Center for Labor–Management Documentation and Archives, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University.

fears by concentrating on their need for a union and educating them about the campaign.[71]

When the boycott was launched, however, ACTWU staff reported that it had produced "a general chilling effect" upon organizing.[72] Stevens seized upon the boycott as a chance to bolster its claims that only the company truly cared about workers' best interests. Again and again managers responded to organizing campaigns by arguing that the union was trying to destroy employees' livelihoods. In a June 1978 letter to workers at its plants in Wagram, North Carolina, general manager Ellis S. Reynolds typically asserted, "*The Union does not want customers to buy our products.* The Union wants to 'Wipe Out' our Company. The Union is engaging in the world-wide boycott of the products you make. *The Union wants to take away your jobs and your job security.*" In July 1978 organizing director Richard Rothstein commented on the effectiveness of these tactics, noting to a colleague that "the company is increasingly using the boycott against us to some effect."[73]

Confronted by such opposition, the union made little progress in signing up new members. In the late 1970s over forty organizers worked on the Stevens campaign, yet by the time of the settlement the union had only been able to secure election victories at small plants in High Point, North Carolina, Allendale, South Carolina, and Montgomery, Alabama. Stevens's labor law violations were not as crude as they had been, yet the company was still able to scare its employees by linking unions to plant closures and economic insecurity. Right across the South, organizers repeatedly reported that "fear" was the main obstacle they faced.[74] The union also found it easier to secure support from blacks than from whites. Already working in the better-paying jobs, whites had less reason to organize and more to lose.[75]

[71] Mileski quoted in Paul Swaity to President Finley et al., 15 June 1976, "J. P. Stevens Correspondence" file, fiche 2 of 7, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

[72] "AFL-CIO J. P. Stevens Meeting, Washington D.C.," 14 June 1976, "J. P. Stevens Correspondence" file, fiche 2 of 7, fiche box 7, Finley Papers.

[73] Ellis S. Reynolds to All Employees, 26 June 1978; Jim Wellons to Bernice, 28 June 1978; Richard Rothstein to Paul Swaity et al., 14 July 1978, all in "J. P. Stevens Company Letters to Its Workers," folder, box 366, ACTWU Papers – Cornell (original emphasis).

[74] Hodges, "J. P. Stevens," 60; Evans Hamilton, "Weekly Organizing Activity Report," 18 Aug. 1979, "Evans S. Hamilton," folder, box 48; John Barry, "Weekly Organizing Activity Report," 27 Jan. 1979, "John Barry," folder, box 48; Kathleen Hope Curry, "Weekly Organizing Activity Report," 27 Feb. 1977, "Kathleen Hope Curry," folder, box 57, all in ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

[75] In Milledgeville, Georgia, for example, ACTWU's Robert Tim Brown reported, "Most of the support for the campaign comes from the black employees; the whites well recognize their superior position in the plant and are extremely difficult to organize." Robert Tim Brown to Arthur M. Goldberg, 23 Aug. 1976, "J. P. Stevens Milledgeville, Georgia," folder, box 22, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta. For other reports that detail the difficulties of

The union's association with civil rights groups, which the boycott helped to publicize, also led some white workers to view it as a vehicle for black advancement. The EECs in fact drew almost all of their support from whites, particularly older employees who had struggled to adjust to integration. In 1977 EEC member Wilson Lambert told CBS's Mike Wallace that the union supported "nigger rights." "Most of the ones you get at the union hall are colored," he added. EEC member Kermit Smith claimed that the union's membership was 85 percent black, adding, "they have been promised a lot of things that the union cannot possibly deliver." African Americans also felt that race was crucial in determining union support. "The whites resented the union," claimed Jettie Purnell, "because they was told that union would elevate black above them, and they believed that ... So that's why they didn't want it to happen."[76]

In broader terms, the boycott encouraged Stevens executives to abandon their previous policy of not responding directly to the union's campaign. Announcing this change when the boycott was initiated, a company statement noted,

> It has been the policy of Stevens for many years not to engage in public debate with the Textile Workers Union. The boycott now makes it necessary that the public at large hear our side of the controversy and be informed of the circumstances which have led to a deliberate endeavor by the merged union to paralyze Stevens.

Over the next few years Stevens became increasingly adept at fighting its own public relations battle, laying out systematic responses to the union's allegations in polished statements and position papers.[77]

CEO James D. Finley led the way with a series of direct communications that were mailed to all of the company's workers. Widely regarded as Robert Stevens's protégé, Finley had become CEO in 1969, although Stevens continued to influence company policies behind the scenes. A native

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recruiting whites see Jimmy E. Smith, "Weekly Organizing Activity Report," 1 Sept. 1979, "Jimmy Smith 1979," folder, box 49, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta; and Susan Sachen, "Weekly Organizing Activity Report," 12 May 1979, "Susan Sachen," folder, box 49, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

[76] Lambert quoted in "Target J. P. Stevens," *Sixty Minutes*, March 1977; Smith quoted in "J. P. Stevens," *The MacNeill/Lehrer Report*, 22 Dec. 1976, copies held at the Kheel Center for Labor–Management Documentation and Archives, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University; Jettie Purnell interview with author on 9 Feb. 1996 in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina.

[77] "News from Stevens," June 1976, untitled folder, box 58, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta. See also "J. P. Stevens and Co. Inc. Position Paper," 1 June 1979, untitled folder, box 58, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

Georgian who was described by the *Daily News Record* as "strong-minded in the Stevens tradition," Finley carried on the company's adamant opposition to unionism. He viewed the boycott as a destructive tactic that highlighted the irresponsibility of an over-powerful labor movement. "The union and the leaders of Big Labor," he claimed, "are openly trying to destroy our Company and with it the jobs of 45,000 people. Their actions indicate that they have no concern for Stevens employees." Finley also repeated his assertions that Stevens employees did not want unions and defended his company's record, insisting that while they were not "perfect" they did not have a policy to violate the law. The Stevens chief also encouraged his workers to speak out and lobby against the boycott.[78]

While boycott supporters undoubtedly pushed some firms to reduce the amount of goods that they ordered from Stevens, other companies, including Woolworth, Gimbels, Sears, and J. C. Penney, stubbornly refused to bow to such pressure. Most commonly, executives from these firms insisted that they could not take sides in a labor dispute, although many also argued that it was up to customers to choose which products they would buy. Woolworth's managers were among the most intransigent. "Our policy," explained vice-president J. F. Carroll,

> is to offer our customers quality merchandise at competitive prices, and we believe we do that better than any other retailer in the nation. As is their prerogative, those customers may freely choose to buy or not buy any of the products or services available to them. We do not believe that we should impinge on that prerogative nor take any action inconsistent with our position with respect to this controversy.

Reluctant to take a moral stand, many firms viewed their relationship with Stevens as purely economic. An attorney for J. C. Penney argued that the retailer was "solely a merchandising organization and must judge our suppliers on the value of the goods or services they produce for us."[79]

Stevens executives also made their own efforts to recruit support from some of the same constituencies that the union courted. Between 1977 and 1980 a team of executives gave many addresses to church groups, students, and other interested citizens. In speeches across the country, managers

[78] "Predict Shuffle in Top Brass Won't Alter Stevens' Policy," *Daily News Record*, 23 June 1969, clipping in "Stevens J. P. and Company General Labor, 1966–71," folder, box 678, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; James D. Finley to All Stevens Employees, 31 Jan. 1977, untitled folder, box 33, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta (quotation). See also James D. Finley to Stevens Employees, 9 Sept. 1977, untitled folder, box 33, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta.

[79] J. F. Carroll to Rev. William Troy, 5 Feb. 1980, "Woolworth/Woolco," folder; and Rexford C. Simpson to Peter Goldstein, 2 Sept. 1980, "J. C. Penney," folder, both in box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

calmly emphasized the company's "positive aspects," including its provision of jobs to 43,000 people and its "good reputation" within the South. They also repeated their argument that the boycott indicated that the union really cared little for the job security of the company's workers.[80]

The embattled textile-maker certainly received a great deal of support, particularly in the South, while most of those who backed ACTWU were Northerners. This is illustrated well by looking at the political support given to ACTWU's fight. By July 1978 the boycott had been endorsed by the governors of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Colorado, and Rhode Island, as well as a range of Northern US senators and city government officials. The same pattern was repeated when it came to US representatives; in July 1978 the union had secured the backing of fifty-six representatives, yet none represented the states of the former Confederacy. Representatives from Michigan, Massachusetts, and New York were in fact the most numerous. The strongest boycott chapters were also located in Northern cities. Philadelphia, for example, was described by Del Mileski as a "model for all boycott cities." By March 1977 the Pennsylvania city had strong citizens' and labor committees and they were engaged in an active campaign of store visits.[81]

In Northern cities boycott staff were able to build a strong campaign by working with established networks of labor, civil rights, and feminist activists. In addition, the union tapped support by insisting that Stevens was representative of many Northern companies who had moved South for lower wages, causing plant closings and unemployment in the communities they left behind. Boycott flyers capitalized on this "runaway shop" theme, claiming that the company's move South had caused "tens of thousands of jobs lost in the Northeast." Such material struck a chord in the deindustrializing "rustbelt"; Stevens was, in the words of one group of New York politicians, "a glaring symbol of the runaway shop."[82]

[80] Stefanie Weiss, "J. P. Stevens Administrator Defends Textile Company Against Union Accusations," *Cornell Daily Sun*, 19 April 1978, "J. P. Stevens Company's Statements (various)," folder, box 366, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

[81] "Partial List of Endorsements of the J. P. Stevens Boycott," 9 July 1978, "J. P. Stevens Supporters and Resolutions" file, fiche 1 of 5, fiche box 7, Finley Papers; Manfred Ohrenstein et al. to Marvin Traub, 1 Aug. 1978, "Gimbels," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; Del Mileski to General Officers and Leadership, 24 March 1977, "J. P. Stevens Citizens Committee" file, fiche 3 of 8, fiche box 7, Finley Papers (quotation).

[82] Mike Szpak to all interested parties, 4 Feb. 1978, "Stevens Boycott 1978," folder, box 33, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta; Del Mileski to General Officers and Leadership, 24 March 1977; and "Why Did J. P. Stevens Close 21 Mills and Put 11,700 People Out of Work?" ACTWU Flyer, both in "J. P. Stevens Citizens' Committee" file, fiche 3 of 8, fiche box 7, Finley Papers (quotations).

In contrast, the company's position was strongly supported by the Southern press and regional elites. While the national press generally gave favorable or balanced coverage to the union's efforts, most Southern papers backed Stevens. In the summer of 1976 the two local newspapers in the major textile center of Greenville, South Carolina both ran anti-union editorials where they argued that the boycott indicated that the ACTWU really cared little for the welfare of the company's workers.[83] In communities where Stevens had plants, local elites consistently emphasized the role of the company as the economic lifeblood of their communities. As a minister from Halifax, Virginia put it, "In our community the local J. P. Stevens plant is a good employer and a responsible part of our community life." Citing the boycott as proof that the union would jeopardize local workers' well-being, some directly addressed the fact that ACTWU supporters were outsiders. "Boycott support," claimed an Anderson, South Carolina Baptist minister, "comes largely from people far removed from my community. They are separated by distance – and mis-information – from those of us most affected by their actions."[84]

The regional divide was illustrated well by the reaction of the Presbyterian church to the campaign; in May 1979, for example, the boycott was endorsed by the United Presbyterian Church (the Northern group) while the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the Southern group) reaffirmed its earlier decision not to support ACTWU. Northern backing was problematic for the union because it confirmed Southern suspicions that the union was an outside force. It also ensured that there was little pressure on Stevens within the communities where its plants were located.[85]

Despite these problems, the combined effects of the boycott and corporate campaign gradually brought Stevens to the bargaining table. Seeking to cause investor discontent, the corporate campaign targeted

[83] "Boycotts Are Evil," *Greenville News–Piedmont*, 13 June 1976, 2D; "Stevens union tiff desperate measure," *Greenville Piedmont*, 15 Aug. 1976, both clippings in "J. P. Stevens 1976," folder, box 647, ACTWU Papers – Cornell. For another similar reaction, see "No – Thank You!" *Hendersonville (NC) Times–News*, 7 Sept. 1977, clipping in "J. P. Stevens – Newspaper Clippings," folder, box 34, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta. For a comparison with national press coverage, see Gail Jeffords to Murray Finley et al., 30 June 1980, "Kleeper – Public Relations J. P. Stevens" file, fiche 1 of 4, fiche box 7, Finley Papers; "The N. L. R. B. Lands on J. P. Stevens," *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1978, C13.

[84] Ministers quoted in E. M. Palmer, "A National Boycott: The Most Unfair Labor Practice of All," 9 Nov. 1977, "J. P. Stevens Company's Letters to its Workers, 1977–78," folder, box 366, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 10.

[85] Isadore Barmash, "Stevens: Amid Boycott, Rising Profits," *New York Times*, 3 March 1980, D1, D5; Del Mileski to General Officers and Leadership, 8 Jan. 1979, "Status Reports II," folder, box 401, ACTWU Papers – Cornell.

outside directors on the Stevens board, some of them in charge of companies with union ties. These tactics worked, as union pressure caused two directors to resign from the Stevens board. In addition, union supporters, including many boycott activists, attended the company's stockholder meetings and introduced resolutions that criticized the firm's opposition to unions. A key change occurred in early 1980, when James Finley was replaced by the more moderate Whitney Stevens. Realizing that the union was not going to give in, the new CEO felt that a settlement made sense. "The most important reason for the Stevens company to settle was the fact that the union had been there for seventeen years," recalled ACTWU's Scott Hoyman. "We became the lesser of two evils, an ongoing campaign or some kind of settlement." As Philip Shabecoff of the *New York Times* put it, the union's ongoing boycott and campaign led to a "general weariness" among company executives, who finally decided to make peace.[86]

Given the company's longstanding unwillingness to deal with the union, the contract settlement was a moral victory for ACTWU. During the long battle J. P. Stevens had become, in the words of the *New York Times*, "the chief symbol of industry's determination to resist unionization in the South." By signing a contract, the company had, claimed the *Times*, made "a dramatic shift in its position toward labor–management relations."[87] The settlement in fact contained the key items of union recognition – a check-off of union dues, seniority protection, and a grievance procedure backed up by independent arbitration – that Stevens had bitterly resisted for so long. Jointly covering the plants where the union had won bargaining rights, the settlement also secured a commitment from the company to grant the same terms at any of its sites that the union was able to organize in the next eighteen months. ACTWU leaders saw the agreement as highly significant. It was, claimed Murray Finley, "a major breakthrough." Many workers were also ecstatic. "This is just wonderful," claimed Roanoke Rapids worker Syretha Medlin. "It's a whole new life."[88]

[86] Laina Savory, "Forced off the Board: The ACTWU Corporate Campaign against J. P. Stevens," *Directors and Boards*, Summer 1979, 16–43, in "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc. General Labor 1979," folder, box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; Scott Hoyman interview with author on 6 Nov. 1995 in Summerville, South Carolina; Philip Shabecoff, "J. P. Stevens Pact: Breakthrough, but War Goes On," *New York Times*, 21 Oct. 1980, A16.

[87] Philip Shabecoff, "Stevens Pact is Ratified, Encouraging Unions in South," *New York Times*, 20 Oct. 1980, A1, A16, quotations on A16.

[88] Warren Brown, "Great Labor War Gains Tallied," *Washington Post*, 26 Oct. 1980, A14; "Meeting of the General Executive Board," 19 Oct. 1980, "GEB Minutes 2/23/81; 1/7/81; 10/19/80," folder, box 1005, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 2 (Finley quotation); Medlin

The settlement did not ultimately lead to the union making widespread gains in Stevens's Southern plants. The agreement only covered a small portion of the company's workforce, the bulk of which remained non-union. Following the settlement the company continued vigorously to oppose union organizing efforts, although its activities generally stayed within the law. Since 1980 the decline of the textile industry has also prevented the union from capitalizing on the agreement. Constantly losing members because of plant closings, ACTWU could no longer finance the kind of mass organizing campaigns in the South that it had in the past. The Southern textile industry as a whole declined dramatically over the course of the 1980s and 1990s; in the leading textile state of North Carolina employment in the textile and apparel industries fell from around 300,000 in 1989 to little more than 200,000 a decade later.[89]

Like other US textile companies, throughout the 1980s J. P. Stevens was hurt by the steady rise in imported textiles. The firm tried to meet the threat by automating and becoming increasingly efficient, ensuring that employment at its plants steadily fell. In 1977, at the height of the union's campaign, Stevens employed 44,100 people, but this fell to 23,400 in 1987. The costs associated with modernization and the losses caused by imports led many US textile firms into heavy debt, and these debts were often managed by mergers and plant closings or sales. Between 1983 and 1988 the number of major publicly held textile enterprises in the US in fact fell from fifteen to three. Stevens's fate epitomized these broader trends; in 1988 the company's name was added to a long list of corporate casualties, as it was purchased by a competitor and sold off in pieces to satisfy corporate debts.[90]

The Stevens campaign ultimately had an important impact on subsequent labor relations. Since 1980 labor strategists have copied ACTWU's tactics of forging links with groups outside the labor movement. As unions have

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quoted in Philip Shabecoff, "Stevens Pact is Ratified, Encouraging Unions in South," *New York Times*, 20 Oct. 1980, A16.

[89] General Executive Board Minutes, 23–27 Feb. 1981, "GEB Minutes 2/23/81; 1/7/81; 10/19/80," folder, box 1005, ACTWU Papers – Cornell, 4, 7; Irwin Speizer, "Crisis in Asia costs N.C. jobs in textile mills," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 31 Jan. 1999, clipping in the North Carolina Collection clipping file, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, filed under "Textile Industry."

[90] "J. P. Stevens Annual Report 1977," "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc. Annual Reports, 1967–1981," folder; Stevens Annual Report 1987," "J. P. Stevens and Company Inc. Annual Reports, 1982–1988," folder, both in box 677, ACTWU Papers – Cornell; Hodges, "J. P. Stevens," 62; Rhonda Zingraff, "Facing Extinction?" in *Hanging by a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles*, ed. Jeffrey Leiter, Michael D. Schulman, and Rhonda Zingraff (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1991), 199–216, 213–14.

become increasingly reluctant to strike, recognizing that their members could be easily replaced, they have instead sought to bring pressure on companies by creating a broad basis of support that would isolate renegade firms in the media and corporate community. Despite facing a hostile climate, in the 1980s and 1990s unions made successful links with unconventional allies in high-profile struggles against BASF (1984–89) and RAC Corporation (1990–92). In these campaigns, as in the Stevens struggle, unions also showed that labor struggles could still produce a broad range of social activism. The boycott also ran alongside the first "corporate campaign," designed by maverick activist Ray Rogers to bring pressure against the company at the highest level of the corporate hierarchy. In the 1980s and 1990s, the corporate campaign became a central feature of union struggles, with Rogers himself aiming to repeat his successes at J. P. Stevens in high-profile battles against the Hormel Meatpacking Company and International Paper.[91]

On the whole, however, it has proven difficult for unions to secure major victories in the years since the Stevens settlement. The 1980s and 1990s were years of dramatic decline for the American labor movement. Between 1983 and 1999, for example, union membership fell from around 20 percent of the non-agricultural labor force to a mere 13.5 percent.[92] A key reason for labor's problems has been its inability to secure labor law reform. As the Stevens case highlighted, determined firms were willing to openly violate the NLRA, and penalties needed to be more stringent if corporate behavior was to change. The Stevens campaign was integrally connected with AFL-CIO efforts to reform the NLRA. Seeking to capitalize on the broad support that it had mobilized it in its fight with the textile giant, in the late 1970s the AFL-CIO launched a major campaign to pass favorable legislation. Introduced in the Spring of 1977 by a Northern Democrat, the Labor Reform Bill (H.R. 77), otherwise known as the "Stevens bill," sought to make it easier for unions to organize. The bill allowed unions to be certified on the basis of card authorizations and, in a direct swipe at Stevens, sought to prohibit companies who had committed "flagrant or repeated violations of NLRB orders" from doing business with the federal government for three years. The bill was, however, strongly opposed by business groups, and a well-funded campaign spearheaded by the National Association of Manufacturers helped to ensure its defeat. Although it passed the House by a

[91] Tom Juravich and Kate Bronfenbrenner, *Ravenswood: The Steelworkers' Victory and the Revival of American Labor* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1999), 69–71, 152–53; Timothy J. Minchin, *Forging a Common Bond: Labor and Environmental Activism in the BASF Lockout* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003). [92] Zieger and Gall, *American Workers, American Unions*, 243.

big margin (257 to 163), a successful filibuster by Senate conservatives meant that H.R. 77 was sent back to committee to die. In the summer of 1978 reform supporters tried in six cloture moves to get the sixty votes they needed but narrowly failed.[93]

The fate of H.R. 77 was a decisive turning point, especially as it highlighted that Democratic Presidents were no longer as responsive to a waning labor movement. Union leaders had to tone down H.R. 77 in order to secure Jimmy Carter's support and felt that the President could have done more to break the Senate filibuster. The defeat of the bill emboldened companies to take a hard line with unions, with many abandoning the "social contract" that had governed labor relations since the New Deal. With the election of Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980, firms were further encouraged to take on organized labor, especially after the new President replaced 13,000 striking air-traffic controllers in the summer of 1981. By the early 1980s even workers in highly unionized industries such as paper and automobiles were confronted by the rise of "concessionary bargaining." When union members struck in an effort to resist these demands, many were permanently replaced; between 1985 and 1989 businesses hired permanent replacements in around 20 percent of all strikes.[94]

Not surprisingly, unions have had little success in organizing the South in the years since the Stevens settlement. In a more diversified economy, organizers have struggled, especially as much of the region's growth has occurred in service industries where unions are traditionally weak. The region has also continued to market its low wages and lack of unionization in order to attract outside industry, and indices of union representation consistently list Southern states as the least organized in the nation. In 1987, 17 percent of US manufacturing workers belonged to unions but in South Carolina this figure was just 3.6 percent. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Southern states had the lowest wages and benefits of any in the country. In 1988, for example, only nine US states had not enacted minimum-wage laws, and six of these states were in the southeast. Southern workers also received the least protection in terms of compensation for disability and unemployment, and had the highest rates of occupational disease. The Southern Regional Council, an Atlanta-based civil rights agency that

[93] "Watch Out for 'Stevens Bill' and Attack on R-T-W Laws," *Labor Analysis and Forecast* 21:9 (1 May 1977), in "J. P. Stevens – Newspaper Clippings," box 34, ACTWU Papers – Atlanta; Archie Robinson, *George Meany and His Times: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 376–78.

[94] Robinson, 373–74; Julius Getman, *The Betrayal of Local 14: Paperworkers, Politics, and Permanent Replacements* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1998), 10–24; Zieger and Gall, 247–48, 256–59.

investigated Southern working conditions, concluded in 1988 that the southeastern states had a "dismal record" of protecting their workers.[95]

Since 1980 companies across the US have copied the tactics that Stevens had pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s. As recent work has highlighted, in these years a growing number of companies deliberately violated labor laws in order to break union organizing drives. Many relied on mass discharges of union activists, reasoning, as Stevens had, that by the time the NLRB reinstated these workers the union's efforts would have faltered. By 1980, in fact, at least one out of every twenty workers who had voted for a union in an NLRB election was dismissed. Firms also used "captive audience" meetings to bombard their employees with negative material about unions, just as Stevens had done so effectively in the 1960s and 1970s. As AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumpka complained in 1999, "intimidation and interference by employers is such standard practice in today's workplace that the freedom to form a union doesn't really exist at all." As such, the Stevens campaign ultimately left a mixed legacy for the American labor movement; while showing that unions were still capable of coming up with innovative and effective strategies, it also illustrated to companies just how effective illegal opposition could be in thwarting organizing campaigns.[96]

[95] "The Climate for Workers in the United States: 1988," Southern Regional Council Report, held at the Southern Regional Council, Atlanta (copy in author's possession).

[96] Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 238–47, quotation on 247.