

Labor Pact Reached At Townsend Culinary; Immigrants a Major Part of Work Force

The Washington Post

March 22, 1999, Monday, Final Edition

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Section: FINANCIAL; Pg. F19

Length: 527 words

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Body

After years of litigation, including a rare class action sexual harassment suit by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the largely immigrant work force at Townsend Culinary Inc. in Laurel has won agreement on its first union contract.

The agreement negotiated earlier this month by Local 400 of the United Food and Commercial Workers union provides wage increases, improved health benefits and union protections even if the company is sold.

The contract agreement also represents a major trend in unionizing efforts by organized labor that has, in effect, returned to its roots by once again targeting poor, immigrant workers at the bottom of the nation's economic ladder.

Approximately 85 percent of the company's 200 hourly employees are noncitizens and, as a group, speak six different languages. More than half the workers are female.

"They are who we used to be," said Local 400 President Jim Lowthers, referring to the immigrant past of many in the labor movement. Local 400, with 40,000 members in Maryland, Virginia and bits of North Carolina and West Virginia, now has nine full-time organizers who speak Spanish, French, Vietnamese and Korean.

The breakthrough in contract talks came late last year when the federal courts upheld an injunction by the National Labor Relations Board and ordered the company to recognize the union and bargain for a contract. Soon after, in late November, an administrative law judge at the NLRB added to the pressure on Townsend with a ruling that the company had violated federal labor law on a number of fronts.

At that point, said David Majors, vice president for human resources at Townsend, the company decided to settle the case and negotiate a contract. "We were in negotiations once we got the ruling from the NLRB judge," Major said.

Once the two sides sat down at the table the talks went quickly. Majors said agreement was reached after four bargaining sessions. "It was very amicable," he said.

The new contract provides wage rates ranging from \$ 6.25 to \$ 8.40 an hour depending upon skill levels and bonus payments for workers with the lowest skills, and vacation benefits of up to five weeks after 25 years compared with two weeks maximum after six years of service. In the event the company is sold, the contract has a successorship clause, which means the new owner must recognize the union and the contract.

The EEOC sexual harassment suit is still unsettled, but Townsend attorney Barry Willoughby said there have been discussions about a possible settlement. The problem is who should pay more, Townsend or the W.R. Grace Co.,

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which sold the food preparation company to **Townsend** in March 1996. **Townsend** maintains that the sexual harassment alleged by the EEOC occurred under Grace.

A separate complaint by the Justice Department against **Townsend** also is pending. The government said **Townsend** violated the rights of two legal **immigrants** who were fired after failing to immediately produce certain immigration documents. Both Willoughby and the union agree that the NLRB settlement effectively remedies the Justice Department complaint making that action moot.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: **LABOR** UNIONS (99%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (91%); AGREEMENTS (90%); LITIGATION (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); **LABOR** & EMPLOYMENT LAW (89%); WAGES & SALARIES (89%); SEXUAL HARASSMENT (89%); JUDGES (89%); COLLECTIVE BARGAINING (89%); CIVIL RIGHTS (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); CLASS ACTIONS (78%); TALKS & MEETINGS (78%); ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGES (78%); DECISIONS & RULINGS (78%); SETTLEMENT & COMPROMISE (78%); MIGRANT WORKERS (78%); **LABOR FORCE** (78%); SUITS & CLAIMS (78%); IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); FOREIGN **LABOR** (78%); INJUNCTIONS (78%); HUMAN RESOURCES (78%); **LABOR** DEPARTMENTS (73%); BONUS PAY (73%); AGENCY ADJUDICATION (66%); ADMINISTRATIVE LAW (65%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (65%); JUSTICE DEPARTMENTS (60%)

Company: W R GRACE & CO (51%); W R GRACE & CO (51%); US EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION (84%); NATIONAL **LABOR** RELATIONS BOARD (72%); NATIONAL **LABOR** RELATIONS BOARD (55%)

Organization: US EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION (84%); NATIONAL **LABOR** RELATIONS BOARD (72%); NATIONAL **LABOR** RELATIONS BOARD (55%); US EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION (84%); NATIONAL **LABOR** RELATIONS BOARD (72%); NATIONAL **LABOR** RELATIONS BOARD (55%)

Ticker: GRA (NYSE) (51%)

Geographic: NORTH CAROLINA, USA (79%); MARYLAND, USA (79%)

Load-Date: March 22, 1999