

Battle for workers' rights in Tar Heel

By Paddy Lehane
STAFF WRITER

Paul Bruce got some of the worst news a human being can get recently. He was diagnosed with cancer. Things would get much worse for him, however.

He'd been working at Smithfield Food's pork processing plant in Tar Heel, N.C. for two years. He took time off from work to recover from painful chemotherapy. Little did he know, he would soon be fired.

"I worked at Smithfield for two years, but then they fired me 'cause I got sick," said Bruce in a statement released by smithfield-justice.org. "While I was in the hospital, they fired me for missing work and cut off my insurance. We lost everything: our home, our savings, even our car insurance."

Paul Bruce's story is one of many stories of unfair practices that come out of the Tar Heel plant.

The plant is the largest hog processing plant in the world. Each day, 32,000 hogs are killed, and 5,500 people work non-stop cutting meat.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, which represents meatpackers, has been trying to organize the workers there for years. The union's efforts have been fought brutally by the company.

The UFCW cites a plethora of reasons for the need for a union. Workers are routinely injured, fired, and denied workers compensation at the plant, according to the UFCW.

There are stories of workers whose repetitive-stress injuries were misdiagnosed or ignored by the company doctor. Some were told that their injuries weren't work related, therefore making them ineligible for worker's compensation.

The treatment of workers is one of the biggest issues surrounding the union drive, but the struggles for a fair and balanced election process have marred progress.

Union elections were last held in 1997 by way of secret ballot. During these elections, Smithfield was accused of using physical violence, illegal surveillance, and increased racial tensions in the plant to ensure a union

loss.

Smithfield was later found guilty of these charges, and the 1997 election was considered invalid due to the biased and dangerous climate created by the company. Since the court ruling, Smithfield has been even more adamant about halting union activities.

The UFCW argues that workers are continually being intimidated, which is creating an impossible climate for fair elections. The UFCW wants the unionization of the plant to be decided by check-card voting.

Check-card voting is essentially signing union cards, as opposed to holding secret-ballot election. If a majority of workers sign cards, the plant becomes unionized. This method is highly controversial.

Smithfield argues that through signing union cards, the union is able to coerce employees to sign through peer pressure. Smithfield advocates the use of secret-ballot elections because they claim it gives all workers a voice.

The UFCW duly notes that secret ballot elections have repeatedly been compromised by the company's illegal actions.

A few weeks ago, the ongoing feud between the two groups took a nasty turn. Smithfield filed a suit against the UFCW under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statute.

The RICO statute was created to and credited with destroying the Mafia and other organized crime groups.

"The company action constitutes hypocrisy of the highest order, seeking to hide behind a frivolous lawsuit," the union said in a press release.

Smithfield has recently angered its employees even more. Smithfield has been found guilty of threatening their Latino workforce with calls to immigration authorities.

Recently immigration authorities raided the plant and arrested 25 workers. This prompted a walkout that slowed production, while showing solidarity amongst the workers.

The fight between the company and the union is clearly far from over and a finalized outcome is far out of reach.

DALAI LAMA



DALAI LAMA HONORED IN WASHINGTON

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and the leader of the Tibetan Government in exile, Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso currently lives in India along with an estimated 100,000 Tibetans exiled from their homeland. The Dalai Lama had ruled Tibet since the 17th century until the 1959 communist takeover.

But Dalai Lama Gyatso has recently shifted policy to negotiate for the same kind of independent autonomy from the PRC that Hong Kong currently enjoys rather than independence.

"Beijing continues to allege that my hidden agenda is a separation and restoration (of) Tibet's old social political system," said the Dalai Lama in his acceptance speech to CNN News.

"Such a notion is unfounded and untrue. Much of the world is waiting to see how China's concepts of harmonious society and peaceful rights would unfold."

According to Associate Professor of Political Science George Guo, possible U.S. influence has hampered negotiations for the PRC.

The PRC is currently trying to balance "One China" and "Open China" ideologies with regional disputes and explosive economic growth.

"With an ideological gap following the

fall of communism, China is still vulnerable to the influence of a powerful belief," Guo said.

"They aren't sure the Dalai Lama won't change things, and they're concerned about foreign influence."

President Bush's words at the ceremony did little to ease Chinese ire, as he continually stressed the importance of independence and religious rights.

"Americans cannot look to the plight of the religiously oppressed and close our eyes or turn away," Bush said.

The Foreign Ministry has threatened that the issue could impact Chinese trade policy, and have summoned American ambassador Clark T. Randt to negotiate.

Canada faced similar outrage from the PRC when it made the Dalai Lama an honorary citizen.

First given to George Washington in 1776 by the Continental Congress, the Congressional Gold Medal is the highest civilian award in the United States.

Each medal is intended for display rather than wear, and is struck by the U.S. mint with a unique design specific to the recipient's merits.

The Dalai Lama joins the ranks of Nathaniel Green, Mother Teresa, and Charles Shultz.



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UFCW organized many "Justice @ Smithfield" protests in North Carolina, bringing together many civil rights groups to advocate for safe work environments and better job security. Here, UFCW protests in front of Harris Teeter in Charlotte.

Despite the Dalai Lama's attempts to negotiate the independent autonomy of Tibet, China continues to maintain their anti-Tibet stance, even in the face of growing international support for a more free Tibet.