



Burlington Industries promotional photo

Burlington Industries. The suit charged that the nation's largest textile manufacturer did not tell some of its employees that their lung problems stemmed from breathing cotton dust.

Burlington spokesman Byrd said he would not comment on the case, but he added that one individual named in the suit—David Burdette—said at the press conference held on the day the suit was filed that he had smoked for more than 40 years, was diagnosed as having emphysema and urged to quit smoking by his physician.

"Offhand, I think the allegations are not valid," Byrd said.

Although the legislative and judicial aspects of the CBLA program are important, the association members maintain that none is as effective as the personal contact between CBLA members and mill employees.

Pollitt, a staff member with the Durham chapter of the CBLA, said the screening clinics and educational programs presented by brown lung victims were the organization's most potent weapon.

Each CBLA member has a story to tell, and each is eager to tell it. It is often painful to hear these men and women talk. They wheeze, cough and struggle for air. But they know their story could help others.

Willie Rappe was one of the Greensboro chapter's most active workers. His friends and associates remember him as being very dedicated to educating textile workers to the danger of brown lung.

Lacy Wright, president of the Greensboro chapter of the CBLA, said Willie was typical of association workers. He said Willie used his case to further the goals of the CBLA—to help people with brown lung get compensation and to get the mills cleaned up.

"Willie was very dedicated to his work with us," Wright said. "He didn't have too much education, but he did all he could to help us as long as he was able to go. He was good talking to people and trying to warn them."

Wright worked in a cotton carding room for 40 years until his retirement 13 years ago.

"When I couldn't work in the card room no longer, I retired," he said. "People knew it was dusty, and that bothered us. But we had no idea what the outcome would be. Nobody ever told me about any diseases."

"They (the textile industry) knew all about England's machinery, production and equipment, but they didn't know about the disease? (England has been compensating its workers since the 1930s.) And all those facts add up, and maybe you'll come out with the same answer I did. I just can't prove it."

Allen Poteat, another Greensboro CBLA worker, said he was always willing to tell his story.

"After working in the mills for over 40 years, I got to where I couldn't go any further," Poteat said. "I was an outpatient at the VA (Veteran's Administration) hospital, and, when I went in for a checkup one time,

Cotton Mills

At left, Burlington Industries promotional photo of fiber opening room. At right, DTH photo of workers leaving Burlington Industries' Durham plant. DTH photographers were denied admittance to any Burlington plant.

the doctor said he was going to make an X-ray. He came back and said I had TB (tuberculosis), and he was going to isolate me.

"A few days later, he came back and said I didn't have TB, I had cancer. I thought, 'Lord have mercy, I'd rather have TB.' A week later, he said I didn't have cancer, but he didn't know what it was. That's when I realized the cotton dust had done its harm."

"I've collected my award, but I had to go through hell to get it. One thing was, they would send me to a doctor miles and miles away, and half the time, I wasn't able to go. It looked like just a thing to keep us discouraged," Poteat said.

Poteat said one reason conditions had not improved was that there are no unions to fight for workers' rights in Southern textile mills. "All most people's ever done is work in the mills with cotton, and they don't know nothing about unions," he said.

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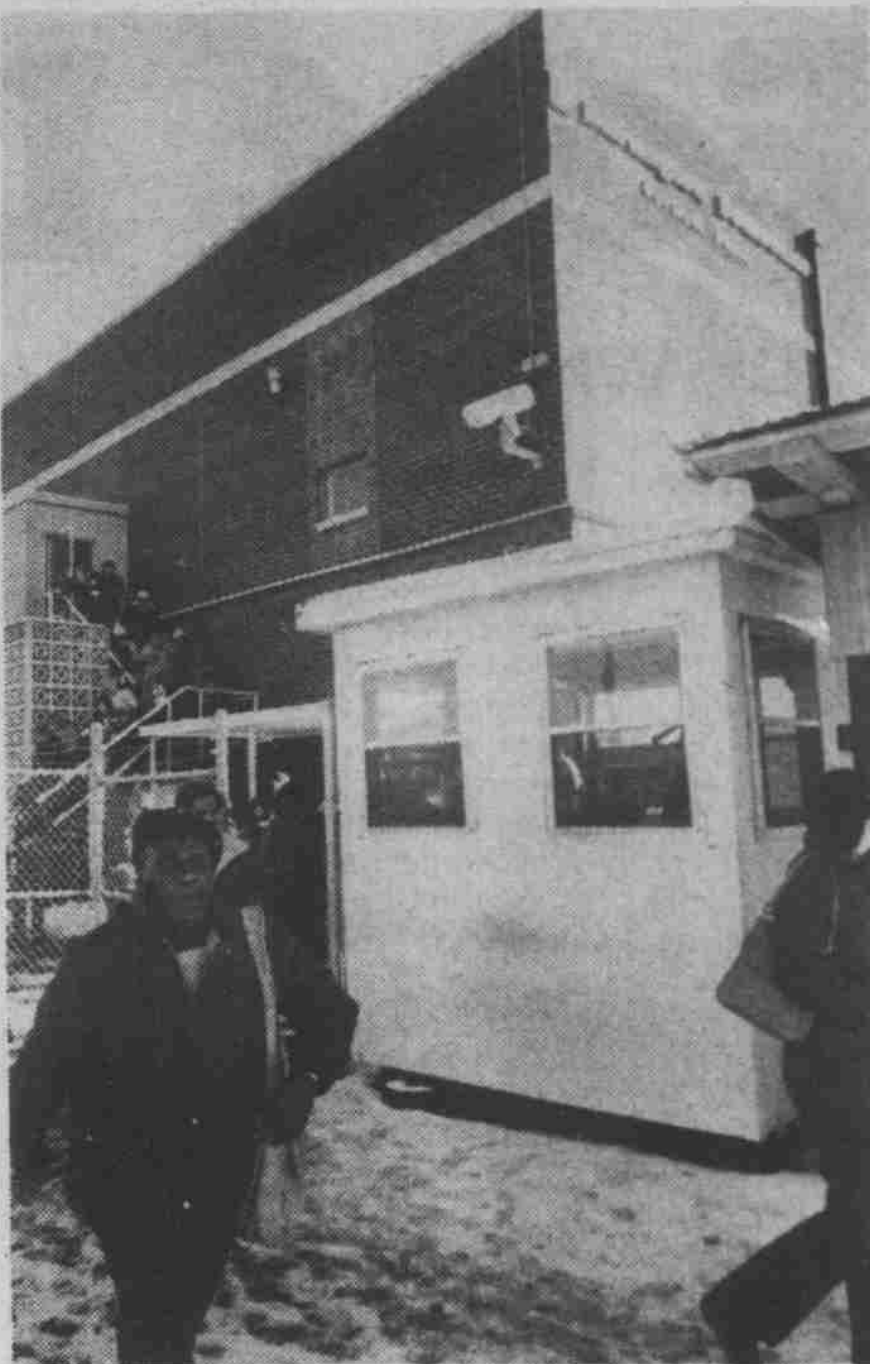
Lacy Wright

Humphries, also a CBLA worker, said he agreed that the absence of unions in North Carolina has slowed down the improvement of working conditions in the state's textile mills.

"One reason the industry gets away with so much is because we don't have no union," Humphries said. "I've always worked in a cotton mill, and, like me, everybody don't know no different. If there's not an organization, one person can't do anything. People are scared of unions—or at least they were when I was working. People get fired for working with the union."

Despite the low percentage of North Carolina workers who belong to a union—7 to 8 percent—the United States Textile Workers sent organizers to the state in hopes of rallying workers behind the brown lung issue.

Charles Vickery, a state senator from Chapel Hill, said the continuous efforts toward unionization had spurred the industry to become more liberal in settling



DTH/Jay Hyman

compensation claims and in efforts to clean up the mills.

"It is a fear among textile manufacturers that the scare of brown lung would hasten the unionization of employees," Vickery said. "Unions began to use brown lung as a tactic to organize, so the manufacturers had to do something about it themselves."

So the state Textile Manufacturers Association after a decade of silence, took a strong stand on the issue. In its 73rd annual meeting Nov. 28, the trade association voiced support for fair compensation of textile workers who suffer from byssinosis.

James H. Martin, NCTMA president and president of TI-CARO Inc. of Gastonia, stressed the industry's determination to resolve the cotton dust issue.

"No textile manufacturer makes dust," Martin said. "We're doing everything we can to clean it up. And there's no one—absolutely no one—more interested in solving the problem than we are."

The efforts of the manufacturers apparently have been successful. May Lewis, UTW organizer, would only say that her efforts had been "largely unsatisfactory."

The straightforwardness and poignancy CBLA workers add to the battle for improved working conditions and compensation practices has done much to bring byssinosis into the public eye, but most members agree that there is a long way to go.

"We still have a major obstacle to overcome in legislative ignorance," CBLA staff member Pollitt said. "There are people we just can't get through to, and there are people who refuse to listen."

State Sen. Willis Whichard of Durham County said he had heard little about brown lung.

"I've read a few newspaper articles about it, but I don't remember anyone talking to me about it," he said. "I can't recall any legislation on that in the nine years I've been in the legislature."

"Legislatures are basically responsive bodies, and the brown lung issue has been ignored simply because there hasn't been any real effort to bring it up before the legislature. There's just no public clamor to have something done."

But Pollitt said the clamor is forthcoming. "With the governor's investigation and the Burlington Industries suit already started, we feel we are well on the way to achieving our goals," she said. "But we also know the fight is just beginning."

Dinita James is editor of Weekender.