



Organizing New Members Around Health & Safety

Plucking Cargill

The RWDSU in Georgia

■ *Linda Cromer*

Buena Vista, Georgia. Population 1,544. An old courthouse surrounded by trees stands sentry at the junction of Highways 26 and 41, where the town's one stoplight slows travelers long enough to consider stopping for gas or a soft drink.

It's a hot, dusty, on-the-way-to-somewhere-else kind of town. Jobs are scarce. Hard times are a permanent fact of life. It's a community typical of rural towns throughout the South, where the plantation mentality has never really disappeared.

Buena Vista is remarkable, however, because of the courage and determination of the mostly black, mostly female poultry processing workers at Cargill, Inc. Their story is one of organizing a union to force management to pay some attention to the health and safety problems of poultry workers. The union, the Retail, Wholesale & Department Store Union (RWDSU), threw everything at Cargill to help these workers organize, stay organized, and win a first contract. The workers at Buena Vista, in turn, have inspired the RWDSU to target the poultry industry across the South for a major organizing effort in the 1990s.

Chicken processing is perilous work. Every year, almost 28,000 workers in poultry plants lose their jobs or become disabled due

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to work-related accidents or injuries. It's among the ten most dangerous jobs in the country—in an industry racked with rapacious processors who consider damaged workers just another by-product.

Cargill is no exception. With a worldwide reputation as a grain king, it is the largest privately held company in the United States. This Minneapolis-based firm has carpet-bagged its way into becoming the 21st largest chicken broiler producer in the country, with sales of \$100 million in 1989 expected to increase by 50% by 1991. And it's feeding its growth with the damaged bodies of workers like those in the Buena Vista plant.

Before dawn, workers like Rebecca Lee, a union steward and single mother of three, step off the sleeping streets of Buena Vista, pass through a narrow gate in a towering chain-link fence topped by barbed wire and into the frantic, dangerous environment of the poultry slaughterhouse. The 550 workers at Cargill labor in a world of extremes in heat and cold, hectic line speeds, and crowded conditions—a nether world haunted by a parade of chicken carcasses engaged in a ghostly dance as conveyers move them down the production line at the rate of 10,000 a day.

Early Organizing Defeats

The Retail, Wholesale & Department Store Union (RWDSU) started organizing in Buena Vista in the 1960s. At that time, the plant was owned by the Dents, a local family with deep roots and strong influence in the community. In a town where a small group of wealthy white families dominated business and politics, the Dents were a powerful force. Opening the plant in 1955, by the late 1960s they were processing 65,000 birds a week, with an almost exclusively black work force.

According to Victoria Hudson, a disabled Cargill worker and union and community activist, "It wasn't so bad with the Dents, treatment-wise. If you got hurt, they would take you to the doctor. The problem was there weren't any benefits outside of the little money they paid you. The Dents thought the Dents needed insurance, but us black folks didn't need insurance, or holidays, and sure enough we didn't need vacation time. Some of us knew we just had to do something or it wasn't ever gonna get better."

That's when Hudson and a small group of her co-workers contacted Guy Dickinson at the Atlanta-based Southeast Council of the RWDSU. They joined hands to begin a 20-year struggle to bring the union to Buena Vista.

Workers wanted change, and they went up against overpowering

resistance in an isolated, reactionary, racist environment. The first union representation election in 1969 was a heart-breaking loss, but the seeds of desire had been sown. In early 1980, the workers were ready to try again, but word got out that the Dents were selling the plant and once again fear killed the campaign. The Dents did sell, and in August 1980, Cargill became a household word in Buena Vista.

In 1985 the plant began a deboning operation with speeded-up lines processing more and more chickens and producing more and more injured workers. In early 1986, ever worsening working conditions—including icy floors, ammonia and carbon dioxide leaks, dull knives and scissors—resulted in another union representation election, and another loss. Then “business as usual”—more chickens, faster lines.

The 22 Walk Out

On December 31, 1986, New Year’s Eve, the temperature was unbearably cold in the cut-up department. Ice was forming on the birds. Fingers were numb with the cold. So numb that a normally dangerous job utilizing sharp tools was made even more hazardous, too dangerous to keep working. Twenty-two brave women—several with almost 20 years seniority—strode to the office and complained to management that it was too cold, asking that the fan circulating cold air be turned off for awhile. They were told to get out of the office and go back on the line. They got out of the office, and then went right on walking. That first step out of the plant was the first step in a successful union representation campaign. Billy Harpe, union steward, remembers that day, “Those 22 ladies woke us up. Enough is enough.”

“The 22,” as they came to be known in the community, were notified that they had been replaced. They contacted Dickinson at the RWDSU. Unfair labor practice charges were filed and RWDSU staffers, assisted by organizers assigned to the AFL-CIO’s Industrial Union Department, were once again knocking on doors, meeting with Cargill workers, and mobilizing community support.

A litany of safety and health problems in the plant fueled the campaign: standing pools of water and grease in work areas, overcrowding on the lines, unguarded power saws, dull knives and saws and scissors, unsanitary bathroom facilities without proper lighting and ventilation, open drains backed up near electrical outlets. And more: inadequate hearing protection, frequent ammonia and carbon dioxide leaks, icy build-up in colder areas of the plant, a treacherous build-up of grease and fat on the

floor in other areas, an ever-growing list of workers with hand, wrist and shoulder problems.

Resolute Cargill workers including Billy Harpe and Zelma Ghant, also a steward now, put in grueling hours on the production line at the plant and long hours into the evening with RWDSU organizers visiting the homes of other workers. They were spreading the word: It was "union time" at Cargill.

In May of 1987, by a vote of 172-78, Cargill became the first unionized plant in Marion County, Georgia.

The Fight to Stay Union

Bargaining began in July. Meeting after meeting. Delay after frustrating delay. The union's election win had shown the company that the workers couldn't be scared or bought out. The company's new plan was to wait them out, and wear them out.

Discouraged workers were given a boost in September 1987 when Administrative Law Judge Philip P. McLeod ruled that "the 22" were fired for concerted activity and ordered that they be reinstated and made whole for any loss of earnings and benefits. But the company appealed. And negotiations were going nowhere.

By May of 1988 word was out that three company flunkies were circulating a decertification petition. The farce being performed by bad company actors at the bargaining table was in danger of becoming a tragedy for the many workers who had struggled so long and so hard. It was clear that it was time for the union to broaden the stage beyond the bargaining table. Working hand-in-hand with the AFL-CIO's Food and Allied Service Trades Department (FAST), the RWDSU launched a multi-faceted attack.

Relationships with media contacts in the surrounding area—in Columbus, 30 miles away, and in Albany and Atlanta, from 60 to 100 miles in different directions—were nurtured and strengthened. Press packets were prepared to explain the chronology of events at the plant. Reporters were courted and educated about the effects of carbon dioxide and ammonia exposure and the problems with repetitive-motion injuries. It paid off. A series of plant-gate job actions with a safety and health focus received surprisingly sympathetic treatment from the press.

Cargill family members holding stock in the company started receiving handwritten letters at their homes in Minnesota from Cargill workers asking them to intercede in negotiations to bring about a fair settlement. We knew we had touched a nerve when the company's attorney interrupted a negotiating session to take a phone call and returned to the table demanding to know what



...Linda Cromer with Cargill workers.

we thought we were doing "with those damned letters."

Cargill workers were being systematically denied access to a doctor for in-plant injuries. The company nurse was handing out Advil for everything from cut fingers and broken toes to carpal tunnel syndrome. Union stewards began documenting every injury in the plant, and accompanying injured workers to the nurses' station demanding that they be permitted to see a doctor. Union staffers set up portable computers outside the plant gate and took over 300 affidavits from injured workers. They were screened for referral to sympathetic attorneys for help with worker compensation claims. The affidavits were later used to substantiate our case in an OSHA complaint.

In July of 1988, the RWDSU was informed by the NLRB that the Board had received a decertification petition for the Buena Vista plant. It was a possibility the union had discussed since before the certification period ran out in May. And we were ready.

We requested the OSHA 200 logs back to and including 1983. Cargill's nurse and personnel staff spent a week creating the fiction that adequate records had existed before the request. The union began analyzing the doctored forms for patterns and discrepancies and building our case for an OSHA complaint.

Organizers and committee members were at the plant gate at every lunch break and shift change to talk to workers. Weekly newsletters kept workers informed about the status of negotiations and educated them about their rights when injured on the job.

The Sheriff of Marion County, Horace Snyder, was (and is) a

part-time truck driver for Cargill. He and his deputies would wheel up to the plant gate following a call from the company whenever handbillers appeared. Armed and in uniform, Sheriff Snyder's mini-militia failed in their attempt to intimidate the Cargill workers.

We set up a series of dates for injured workers to be examined by Dr. Gail Turner, a local black physician concerned with the plight of Cargill workers. Our first outing was a mobile set-up in a van outside the plant gate for workers with hand and wrist pain. In order to be examined, scores of injured workers breached a line of hostile law enforcement officers stationed between the plant gate and the van. The media coverage was extensive and friendly to the union. Cargill's management refused comment. Workers who previously felt they had to accept pain and eventual disability with no recourse were learning otherwise.

A series of radio spots featured popular former professional wrestler Thunderbolt Patterson, who urged Cargill workers, "Don't be misled, put this is your head: Vote for the RWDSU September 1. It's a union that will fight for your rights every day."

With the assistance of the IUD's James Orange, we received a letter of support from Martin Luther King III. It was especially timely because of publicity surrounding the 25th anniversary of Dr. King's March on Washington.

Jesse Jackson had been front and center in every magazine, newspaper and television newscast for months because of the 1988 party primaries and the upcoming Presidential election. We asked for and received a letter of support for the Cargill workers, in which Rev. Jackson proclaimed, "Cargill workers have too long been hired in, broken down, used up, and thrown out. Your union is working to change that."

The day before the election, we had a mass meeting at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Buena Vista and distributed T-shirts with the slogan "**MARTIN, JESSE, AND ME!**"

September 1, 1988, the union won the election 229 to 180.

Winning a Contract

With the election behind us, we continued manning the gates daily to talk with workers. More dates were set for worker examinations by Dr. Turner.

In October a meeting of representatives of NAACP Chapters from throughout Georgia passed a resolution to support the Cargill workers in obtaining a first contract. The media spread the news.

Union staffers collected over 250 signed releases from workers

authorizing the union to obtain medical records from the company. In November area affiliates of the three major television networks carried coverage of dozens of injured Cargill workers wearing white T-shirts adorned with Red Cross insignia who were gathered outside the plant gate to demand that the company release their medical records to the union.

The next day Cargill General Manager David Pogge received a letter from the Regional Secretary of the International Union of Food and Allied Workers Associations (IUF), an international trade secretariat headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The letter informed Pogge that an IUF committee would be traveling to Buena Vista on November 29th in order to see and hear about the situation first-hand and assess what type of action would be appropriate.

We contacted area media representatives, presented them with press packets explaining the IUF, and they were on hand in force as the IUF delegation addressed workers outside the plant at their lunch break. At shift end, workers met with the IUF committee at Mt. Zion Baptist Church to tell their story. The delegation was moved by the history of pain and injury described by the workers. The press was again sympathetic.

The following week, the company came to the table with an offer—including the establishment of a joint safety and health committee—that the union's bargaining committee felt it could recommend to the membership. In December 1988 the workers voted to accept the company's offer—the first ever labor agreement in the history of Marion County, Georgia.

And in January 1989 Cargill lost its final appeal on "the 22," who were reinstated and have received full back pay with accumulated interest.

The Fight Continues

Though Cargill signed a contract, it has refused to fulfill its obligations under that contract.

Besides the regular grievance-by-grievance combat in the plant, the RWDSU has filed an OSHA complaint alleging that Cargill is violating the Occupational Safety and Health Act by 1) willfully and knowingly exposing workers to jobs throughout the entire plant that result in cumulative trauma injuries and 2) failing to provide proper medical management for injured workers. In October 1989 OSHA levied fines totalling \$242,000 against Cargill and charged the company with 113 willful violations against federal safety and health standards. The company appealed, and

though that appeal is still pending, the company has entered into settlement talks with OSHA.

In other ways, workers' health continues as a central focus of union activity in Buena Vista.

The union continues to monitor every injury at the plant and assists workers through the Workers Compensation maze in Georgia, battling Cargill's resistance every step of the way.

The location of poultry plants in poor rural areas like Buena Vista means limited medical resources for workers and their families. Even workers who have health insurance too often cannot afford the deductible for routine health care many people take for granted. In April this year the RWDSU set up a health fair in Buena Vista for Cargill workers and their families. Free screening was made available for hypertension, high blood pressure, diabetes, child blood lead levels and colon cancer. Participants had the opportunity to talk with doctors and nurses about their health problems at no cost. It's the type of service that has real value for members and their families, and a service we plan to provide at other locations.

Organizing Industrywide

Poultry processing has outpaced all U.S. manufacturing since 1960 to become a \$18 billion-a-year monster spitting out 110 million chickens a week. More than 150,000 mostly unorganized workers labor in 238 poultry plants, three-quarters of which are in the South.

Right-to-work laws in the poultry belt and very high turn-over rates (as high as 50% a year in some plants) make maintaining membership in unionized poultry plants a daily battle second only to the initial organizing campaign. The obstacles to organizing poultry are formidable, but the conditions in the plants make organizing possible.

The RWDSU represents workers in more than a dozen processing plants and is committed to organizing in the poultry industry. At our International Convention in June, the union adopted a new organizing program, including \$1 million targetted for organizing poultry workers. The RWDSU is building a full-time organizing staff with first-hand knowledge of the conditions and frustrations in poultry plants. At the same time, the union has earmarked \$1 million for the education and training of local union officers so that they can handle more of the day-to-day problems in their shops, thereby freeing up service staff to devote more time and effort to organizing.



In addition, recognizing that there is no better organizer than a rank-and-file member with "fire in the belly" who knows what the union has done to improve his or her workplace, we are educating an army of volunteer organizers to assist campaigns on a lost-time basis. Already, RWDSU members from as far away as Michigan, Indiana, New York, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts have come to the South for first-hand experience on poultry campaigns.

Reflecting a growing awareness in all of organized labor that we must concentrate our energies on the battles with employers, not one another, the RWDSU is currently in talks with several other unions in an effort to develop joint poultry campaigns in targeted areas.

In an atmosphere where sophisticated management makes sure that wage and benefit levels are comparable to those in unionized plants, unions must broaden our organizing focus. A public that is often unsympathetic to workers organizing for higher wages has a different attitude when the struggle is for a safer workplace. There is no compelling defense for a company that is crippling its workers.

Safety and health must be a major thrust of organizing efforts in the 1990s—particularly in industries like poultry processing. The mere threat of organizing will force some employers to improve conditions, but until the entire industry is organized, nothing that's been won in Buena Vista or any other union poultry plant is secure, and future gains will be difficult to come by. The experience of Buena Vista, however, argues that all the obstacles *can* be overcome, that we can organize this brutal industry all across the South. ■