

States of the Union

J. P. STEVENS' SATANIC MILLS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And watch the men at play.*

—SARAH NORCLIFFE CLEGHORN

*And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark Satanic mills?*

—WILLIAM BLAKE

FOR THE first time in its 40-year history, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is seeking a nationwide injunction aimed at forcing a corporation to obey the law. J. P. Stevens, the nation's second largest textile manufacturer and peerless union buster, is the company so honored. The action, characterized by a NLRB official as "sort of a short cut" to case-by-case litigation, is itself likely to get bogged down in appeals and delays. That has been the pattern in J. P. Stevens court dramas since the early '60s.

Congress, too, is considering ways of dragging J. P. Stevens into the 20th century, although the company has given legislators to understand it prefers the routine rapacity of the 19th.

Stevens is apparently unaware that Congress may be doing it a favor—rescuing it, that is, from the consequences of its dark, Satanic, anti-union instincts. Thanks in part to a year-long boycott imposed by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU), the corporation's stock has been drifting downward; and its profits for the first three quarters of '77 are off 24 per cent. "Demand will remain influenced by consumer spending trends and possibly by union boycott activities," is the cautious analysis of *Standard & Poor's*.

The union's message to J. P. Stevens is clear enough: *Let our workers organize*. And in case the boycott fails to budge this stubborn, Pharaoh-like firm, ACTWU has dreamed up at least two additional plagues: It has called on the Security and Exchange Commission to investigate J. P. Stevens' far-flung finances, and it has petitioned the Justice Department to start an antitrust action against the company.

These stratagems and their responses are being hatched in Manhattan, which is national headquarter

ers for both the union and its corporate adversary. But the real battleground is in the rural South—in little towns like Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, and Statesboro, Georgia—where J. P. Stevens has all but four of its 85 mills. At stake is the question of whether Southern rural workers can at last gain the power to organize and win a measure of parity, in both wages and working conditions, with their urban confreres.

Until a generation ago, J. P. Stevens was essentially a New England-based corporation. Its origins go back to 1813, when one M. T. Stevens, an early forebear of the dynasty, opened a woolen mill in Andover, Massachusetts. John Peter Stevens, a grandson, expanded the company in 1899 by starting a Dry Goods Commission House in New York City, and the business has been thriving and multiplying ever since—but not necessarily in New England.

Since 1951 Stevens has closed 21 mills in the Northeast, many of them unionized, and has concentrated its attention and its capital on the South. The lure of the South was cheap, non-union labor, low taxes and a congenially feudal atmosphere in which Stevens was able to play lord of the manor to the village serfs. Southern beggars could not be choosers.

The southward migration of Stevens and other textile companies has had predictable consequences. Only about one-fifth of all U. S. textile workers today belong to unions, and half of these live in the urban North; just 21 per cent live in the South. The resulting discrepancy in wages is wide and long-standing: Textile workers earn an average of \$3.88 per hour; workers in all other industries average \$5.41 per hour.

The income gap between North Carolina—where Stevens exerts significant economic power—and the rest of the country is equally dismaying. A recent study by researchers at the University of North Carolina suggests that as of 1975 the state's production workers were earning \$54 a week less than were other American workers,

although profit rates for companies there were higher than the U. S. average.

J. P. Stevens is by no means the only corporation with plants in the rural South that plays this tawdry game of high profits for the few, low wages for the many. But in its determination to keep ACTWU at bay it has demonstrated a meanness of spirit that is rare even among capitalists, and its contempt for the law appears boundless. Back in 1967 the late Boyd Leddom, then chairman of the NLRB, nicely summed up the company's posture. "J. P. Stevens," he said, "is so out of tune with a humane, civilized approach to industrial relations that it should shock even those least sensitive to honor, justice and decent treatment."

The company's odious reputation has made it a symbol to nonunion workers of their problem—and perhaps an unwitting expediter of the solution. For one thing, some respected religious groups not in the habit of entering labor disputes have begun to get on J. P. Stevens' back. Liberal elements within the Catholic Church have labeled the company "a challenger of Catholic tradition on social and economic justice"; and a committee of Protestant ministers, from both North and South, has been formed to help ACTWU press its boycott. For another, Congress has finally evinced more than a passing interest in reforming the National Labor Relations Act—that is, in closing the loopholes that have allowed companies like Stevens to keep any union out long after the workers have voted to let it in.

THE NEW mood in Congress dates back to August 9, of this year, when Representative Frank Thompson (D.-N.J.) took his Labor Subcommittee to Roanoke Rapids for a day-long session of truly hair-raising testimony. The picture that emerged from the hearing convinced most committee members that current labor laws could stand drastic improvement.

Here are some of the points pronoun witnesses made that day. (J. P. Stevens was also invited to testify, but they contented themselves with submitting a written statement that a subcommittee staffer later described as "generally self-exonerating.")

- Although in a 1974 election a large majority of workers at the Roanoke Rapids mill voted to join ACTWU, the company has never recognized the union.

- Stevens routinely fires union organizers. According to Maurine Hedgepeth, a former worker there, "They don't just fire you. They fire your whole family." In 1964, she said, both she and her husband were dismissed because she had given pronoun testimony at an NLRB hearing. "We had three children and neither one of us had a job. They told us if any of us was goin' to get any work we would have to leave town to do it, because nobody here would hire us...."

- Stevens maintains a blacklist. This is denied by company executives, but the policy appears well-documented. ACTWU claims several hundred union sympathizers have been fired, and many of these have given sworn testimony—at the subcommittee hearing or before the NLRB—on the problems they encountered when seeking jobs elsewhere. "Anyone who says there isn't a blacklist in the textile industry doesn't really know the situation very well," notes Donald W. Shriver Jr., president of Union Theological Seminary in New York.

- The company was accused of denying overtime to union supporters, of tapping their telephones and of subjecting them to "coercive interrogations."

- Stevens was also charged with inciting racial hatred in order to turn white workers against the union. At the Roanoke Rapids plant, photographs appeared one day on the company bulletin board featuring the black suspects in the San Francisco "Zebra" murder case. The display was captioned: "Would you want this to happen here?"

- Some witnesses complained about Stevens' failure to control the amount of cotton dust in the factory air. Cotton dust can cause brown lung, or byssinosis, an often fatal respiratory disease. "After 37 years of loyal and faithful service," said one retired Stevens worker, "I have a plaque, \$1,360 and brown lung."

Most of the sins attributed to J. P. Stevens are illegal, yet neither the NLRB nor the courts has been able to stop the crime wave. Last August an exasperated Federal Court of Appeals labeled Stevens "the most notorious recidivist in labor law"—a tribute to the company's ability to absorb small fines in pursuit of large profits.

All of which caused Frank Thompson and his subcommittee to go back to Washington last August and write a strong labor reform bill. The new measure is meant to give Federal agencies at least a reasonable chance of matching their strength and wits with companies that violate Federal labor laws—sort of an even-Stevens bill. Among other things it calls for stiffer penalties and faster court procedures; it also permits the Secretary of Defense to cancel government contracts with any firm that is in violation of the Labor Act—a proviso that J. P. Stevens, the recent recipient of a \$3-million Pentagon contract, may find persuasive.

The House passed this bill in the fall by a wide margin; now it is up to the Senate. Thus far all the predictable interest groups have testified against it: the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Retail Merchants, the American Bankers Association, even the Western States Meat Packers Association. The bill is bad for business, they all said; it will destroy free enterprise.

But let Lucy Taylor, an ex-Stevens worker and a brown lung victim, have the last word. Mrs. Taylor penned a motto that she carries in her pocket-book. It says, "It's too late for me. Dust was our destiny. But we will keep fighting, that the future will be better than the past."