



Iona Moore, who worked 51 years in cotton mills, and union organizer Cecil Jones, who kept the faith and unity in long battle against J. P. Stevens. (Photos for Sun-Times by Phil Jones)

How the union conquered Stevens

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ROANOKE RAPIDS, N.C.—A child of the mills, Iona Moore began spinning cotton here in 1925. She was 13 and for toiling 55 hours a week, Monday through Saturday, she earned \$8.65. That's 16 cents an hour.

On her day off, there was little to do. She'd either walk around the cemetery, play atop a cement bulkhead on the Roanoke River while listening to tales from "an old man named Mr. Beard" or go to the junction to see the 3 p.m. train to Norfolk—"just to see who'd get on and off."

Trains don't stop here anymore, although change arrived last week in Roanoke Rapids (population 16,200), an isolated textile and retail center. The change was a union contract for 3,000 workers at seven plants of J. P. Stevens & Co., the nation's second-largest textile firm.

SETTLED IS A 17-year-old, "open industrial warfare," which became part of an era's legend and even the basis for a Hollywood movie ("Norma Rae").

"I wished it had happened long ago," said Moore, 69, who retired after 51 years of service to a \$20-a-month pension. "It's the greatest thing to happen to the textile people. Now, they've got somebody to look after them."

Admittedly, a nation's image of this town is filled with fiction. The atmosphere is far more genteel and modern than combative and backward. Company goons didn't ride shotgun in pickups, families haven't split apart and there's much more than a stoplight and a general store.

But as Roanoke Rapids has followed the South with a sparkling shopping mall, the rest of the country should follow what has happened here. It has repercussions not just for the South, but, given novel union tactics employed against Stevens, for corporate executives across the land.

The Stevens tale, like the pact that may affect 80 Stevens plants, was ultimately played out at levels as different as the concrete and steel canyons of Manhattan and the pine forests and sandhills of Eastern Carolina. THE UNION SCHEMED, and succeeded, to alienate Stevens from the key Wall Street insurance firms and banks to which its financial health is tied. At the same time, it maintained the critical loyalty among its troops here.

"There's no way it could have been done without those people in Roanoke Rapids,"



Unionist Ray Rogers (right) and his aide, Ed Allen. (AP)

said Ray Rogers, 36, the onetime astronomy major who plotted a unique "corporate campaign" for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union.

It was so effective that, as a condition of settlement, Stevens demanded Rogers not be allowed to repeat the tactics. It was so effective that even Ralph Nader called Wednesday to inquire, "How did you do it?"

Such kudos underlined that, despite major (often unnoticed) union inroads in the South, the Stevens struggle remained a symbol. And though the heart of the struggle was in New York, the soul remained here.

If you need an idea of what happened for the last 17 years, just ask Maurine Hedgepeth, a victim, and Reed Johnston, a judge of Stevens' behavior.

In 1963, the then-named Textile Workers of America decided to try to unionize some of the South's 600,000 non-union textile workers. Burlington Industries, the largest firm, was deemed too big, so Stevens, with 34,000 workers, was the choice.

The company had no time for unions, and Hedgepeth, then 32, had little time for the company. A Stevens weaver, she joined the union in Roanoke Rapids. In 1964, she took a pregnancy leave. When her daughter, Deneen, was born, Hedgepeth returned to work. But the job, she was told, was gone.

SHE KNEW IT WAS because of her union involvement. The union filed an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board. The company resisted and resisted and four years and 21 days later, a federal appeals court affirmed an NLRB decision that Hedgepeth deserved her job back.

Johnston was the NLRB regional director in Winston-Salem, N.C., and, until his retirement in September, oversaw the legal battle. There were hundreds of cases similar to Hedgepeth's and explain why the NLRB cited Stevens for breaking the law on 21 occasions. It's an NLRB record. Nobody else is close.

"The violations were all so crude, without much effort to conceal them," recalled Johnston. "And you knew the decisions had to come from top management, from up high. It amounted to open industrial warfare."

In similar fashion, hundreds of union members were fired like Hedgepeth. The NLRB consistently found Stevens to be lying about the real reason. The tactics, including surveillance of union members, were old-fashioned, although their vigorous implementation was perhaps unparalleled.

AS THE 1960s wore on, Stevens still had the upper hand. A decade would pass before a court would finally give the NLRB extraordinary power, allowing the union into the Stevens plants, suggesting heavy fines and "body attachment," legalese for somebody going to jail.

During that time the union loyalists here endured. It helps explain why the four years and 21 days out of work are Hedgepeth's badge of honor.

During that period, most every penny she could scrape up went for her baby's clothing. Expensive knit dresses would mask her pain. "There was no way I was going to let others know about how bad off we were," she recalled.

Finally, in 1974 the union won the right to an election here and won. It was a first in the Stevens campaign. The company was forced to start negotiating for a contract. But it did so unwillingly, as the NLRB violations piled up and the union called for a boycott of Stevens products.

Union organizer Cecil Jones arrived here shortly after the vote in 1974 and, at the very least, became an expert on motel accommodations. He has spent most of seven years in Horne's Motel in nearby Weldon and is often convinced "the walls are closing in on me."

On weekends he'd commute 180 miles to his wife and three children in Fredericksburg, Va. During the week he, along with organizer Clyde Bush (who ended up marrying a Stevens worker), kept the faith and worker unity.

A main task was compiling daily allegations of unfair, usually petty treatment toward union members. They'd be forwarded to the company for a response. Most would ultimately be included in NLRB complaints. An example:

Employee—John Green
Supervisor—Larry Dickson

There was a death in John's family on 3/31/80. On 4/1/80 John told Larry and Howard Moseley that he would like to be off for one hour. Larry told him he would get back with him. He never did. The union requests to know why John was not given the time off.

Company response: "Johnny told Larry Dickson that the funeral was on Sunday and that he would not need to get off work."

"It's a lie," says Jones.

Stacks of binders, filled with complaints big and small, rest on one of his file cabinets. "You put all these together, all this serious and petty stuff, and it at least showed workers someone was looking after their interest, even though the company refused to do anything."

A couple of times each week Jones and

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Bush would spend fruitless hours in the "Potato House," a renowned, old shack, once meant for storage of potatoes, now a most modest company conference room.

They'd sit across from company officials, talk about a contract and get nowhere. The orders came from the very top, from Stevens Chairman James Finley, who had vowed that the union would never win.

The stage was now set for the imaginative, headstrong exploits of the muscle-bound son of a Massachusetts machinist, a college astronomy major who scared the daylight out of corporate heads with a simple strategy.

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Ray Rogers was born and raised in Beverly, Mass. When the unionizing attempt started, he was a college freshman interested in stars. He later switched majors to sociology and, after college, became a conscientious objector and joined VISTA.

In VISTA he was radicalized among the poor of Appalachia and did grass-roots community organizing. He worked for the United Mine Workers and then became an organizer for the ACTWU.

Early on, Rogers and partner Ed Allen of Elkhart, Ind., realized that "to really get somewhere, one had to understand power, to take a company's strength and make it its weakness. You had to take the power structure behind a company and make that structure the company's vulnerability."

He led a successful attempt to organize Farah Manufacturing Co., a Texas men's slacks firm. The key was to pressure retailers in one of Farah's major markets, Birmingham, Ala., and coax them to stop selling the slacks.

"I'll never forget Willie [William] Farah, the company president, moaning about 'Some guy who's knockin' the hell out of my business in Birmingham.'"

SIMILARLY, HE sought to alienate Stevens from the New York financial community, starting with an amazingly successful ploy: making a company's executives nervous about disruption at an annual meeting, that usually tranquil, well-orchestrated moment of corporate self-congratulation.

First he staged a 4,000-person demonstration outside the Stevens annual meeting in New York. The company quickly decided to switch the next year's meeting from New York, its headquarters and a media center, to South Carolina.

Over three years Rogers then did the following:

- He threatened a major bank, Manufacturers Hanover Trust, with loss of union assets, unless Finley and David Mitchell,

chairman of Avon Products and a member of the Stevens board, were dropped from its board of directors. The men resigned and two weeks later, Mitchell quit the Stevens board.

- He threatened to run a dissident slate of candidates to the board of New York Life Insurance. The next day, R. Manning Brown, chairman of New York Life, resigned from the Stevens board. Finley resigned from the New York board.

Then, in preparing to coax Sperry Corp. to bump Finley off its board by running a dissident slate, he discovered something he didn't know. A corporate committee at Sperry included Richard Shinn, president of Metropolitan Life, the giant that holds nearly \$100 million of Stevens' \$226 million long-term debt.

By this time, Finley had resigned at Stevens, although he was still an influential figure. But last month the die was cast as Rogers threatened Shinn with running a dissident slate at his next annual meeting.

Although Stevens denies it, Shinn played a major behind-the-scenes role to avert such embarrassment. He appealed privately to Rogers' bosses to postpone action while he talked to Whitney Stevens, the company president.

DURING THE LAST two weeks, negotiations picked up and by Oct. 17, a contract with an 8.5 percent raise for Roanoke Rapids workers was tentatively agreed upon in the "Potato House." It would bring their average salary to just over \$5 an hour.

Maureen Hedgepeth took special note that day. It was her daughter's birthday. The contract was ratified two days later. Simultaneously, the company agreed to a 2½-year pact with ACTWU at three other plants and agreed to pay \$3 million in back wages, about \$1,000 a person, owed to Roanoke Rapids workers. The pact would cover workers at 70 other plants if they desire the union.

For its part, the union must desist from the boycott and, finally, Ray Rogers must stop his "corporate campaign." In a letter to non-union supervisors, Stevens made clear "the company continues to be openly and strongly opposed to unions in its non-union plants."

"What's so tragic is that this should have been resolved so much sooner," says Carolyn Little, a 32-year-old insurance broker who is the town's mayor. "Now, we've got to start to improve this town's image."

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To sit in the union office now is to see the education of the innocent. A 64-year-old overhauler in a spinning room, with huge welts on his knees, enters. If he goes on medical leave, he asks Jones, will he have to make the time up? "No, no,"

says Jones. "The company already got all it can out of you." A 52-year-old French-American, a weaver for 28 years, enters with a mangled hand. A finger was nearly sliced off the week before on a loom. She asks Jones if he can help her get workmen's compensation. He says, "Of course," and she soon leaves relieved that "at least I know where I stand and who can help."

And then there's the stout and stocky Hedgepeth. On Thursday, she walked in and, in the space of 20 minutes, came to a personal awakening that may bring a final, bittersweet touch of reality to what has happened here over 17 years.

Hedgepeth was angry about an incident with an abusive anti-union co-worker. She was exhausted and covered with the cotton dust that causes black lung disease. Then she confronted a perplexing query:

What did her daughter, Deneen, think of all of this? What did she think of a mother who had struggled so long, risked so much?

"Somebody else asked me that recently and I refused to let him talk to Deneen," said Hedgepeth. "I don't know what she thinks. I don't want her to get involved. I never did."

Then, a weak smile crossed her face. "You know, I figure maybe it is time to see what she thinks."

With that she led a visitor to her small cement block and wood frame home. There, after all those years, the question was posed.

"I'm real proud of my mom," said Deneen. "She stuck by what she believed a long time."

Would she want to work in the mills?

"Never. They treated my mom unfair."

Would the mother like to see the daughter follow her?

"Never," said the mother. "It's no way to live."