

Labor protests target N.C. pork entity

By Todd Luck

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GREENSBORO (NNPA)

Protesters outside of Harris Teeter stores in 11 cities around the state gathered Saturday to ask the chain to stop carrying Smithfield Food products made at the pork plant in Tar Heel, N.C.

This is the most recent in a series of protests regarding the treatment of workers at the Tar Heel plant and their right to unionize. Harris Teeter is one of many stores that carry Smithfield products made in Tar Heel. Protesters wore tee shirts and held up signs printed by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which has been hoping to add Smithfield workers to their ranks for two decades now. The UFCW lost an election held at the plant in 1997 but the result was thrown out in court; it found Smithfield had used intimidation and violence against workers. This was upheld in federal appeals

court and is echoed by a report from Human Rights Watch.

Among the cities involved were Winston-Salem and Greensboro. Stephen Hairston, president of the Winston-Salem Branch of the NAACP, attended the local protest. The state NAACP is one of many organizations that have taken up the cause. Hairston said there were around 15 people at the protest who held a prayer vigil for Smithfield workers as they held up their signs.

At the end of the rally they went inside Harris Teeter and gave a letter to the management there asking for the removal of Smithfield products and stating the reasons why. Hairston said the manager wouldn't comment on the situation but would pass on the letter to the higher-ups at Harris Teeter.

In Greensboro, Rev. Nelson Johnson of the Beloved Community Center and several others led over 60

protesters in chants, prayers and gospel songs as they stood on the sidewalk in front of the Harris Teeter on West Market Street. Like the Winston-Salem rally, this one was comprised of clergy and members of local churches, NAACP members, college students, local activist group members, UFCW organizers, and others.

"When you support injustice you become unwittingly a part of injustice and we are here to stand against injustice and to stand for justice," Johnson told the protesters.

The stories of Smithfield workers were also told by rally leaders. Johnson told the story of a woman who had a 200 pound frozen pig fall on her and break her shoulder. He said she was denied benefits by Smithfield and then terminated because she couldn't work. Unsafe working conditions, denying workers benefits and firing

injured workers were brought up many times during the rally.

"We want the company to thrive and to be able to sell its products and be a good business partner of the community and the state, but part of what that means is to treat their workers with dignity and respect," said Pastor Gregory Headen of Genesis Baptist Church in Greensboro, who was one of the rally's leaders.

Flyers printed in English and Spanish with information about the protest were handed out to cars as they were coming to and going from the parking lot.

The Greensboro protest also ended with a letter being presented to the manager of the Harris Teeter store who said he would pass it on to his superiors. Johnson said that the manager told him that this happens every six months. Johnson told the

manager that many of the people at that day's protest weren't involved with the issue six months ago. He said this suggested that the movement against Smithfield is growing and the manager might start seeing protesters every few weeks.

A press release from Harris Teeter in response to the protest said, "any issues that may arise between Smithfield, their employees and labor organizations must be resolved between and among those respective parties." The release said the National Labor Relations Board, a federal agency that protects a worker's right to join unions, has procedures to deal with these issues and that "it would be inappropriate for Harris Teeter to insert itself into that process."

Both Hairston and Nelson felt that their individual rallies, as well as the statewide event were successful. Nei-

ther had specific plans for future protests but both said they would definitely happen.

"I think it was successful. I think we got our word out. For us to do it across the state at one time, I think we're getting the ball rolling, and, hopefully, we can make a difference in how this plant treats their workers," said Hairston.

Smithfield didn't respond before press time to inquiries for a comment on the protests. Smithfield is the world's largest pork processor and hog producer with revenues of more than \$11 billion in the 2006 fiscal year. Its plant in Tar Heel is the largest pork processing facility in the world.

The organizers have posted information online for the general public at www.smithfieldjustice.com.

Todd Luck writes for the Winston-Salem Chronicle.

Employment

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about the country's economic health.

President Bush said the report "confirms the continued strength of the American economy. ...This is good news for American workers, and they are also seeing good news in their paychecks."

But Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) countered that the "employment report is not strong enough to allay concerns that the economy is losing steam. If economic growth does not pick up soon, workers' jobs may be at risk as well."

A priority for the new Democratic-controlled Congress, which convenes in January, will be raising the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25. The minimum has not been increased for nearly 10 years.

Americans, meanwhile, are giving Bush lower marks for his economic stewardship. The president's approval rating on the economy sank to 38 percent in December, down from 43 percent in November, according to an AP-Ipsos poll.

Last month's payroll gains exceeded forecasts that 105,000 new jobs would be created. For September and October combined, the economy ended up generating 42,000 more positions than the government previously had thought.

The jobless rate for Blacks held steady at 8.6 percent, while the unemployment rate for Hispanics climbed to 4.9 percent from 4.7 percent in October. The unemployment rate for teenagers dipped to 15.1 percent from 15.4 percent.

Bulking up for the holiday season, retailers added 20,400 positions, the most in a year. Health-care providers expanded employment by 27,700. Professional and business services — a broad category including accountants, bookkeepers, computer designers, architects and engineers — added 43,000 jobs. Financial firms added 11,000 slots.

But pockets of pain were evident reflecting fallout to the ailing housing and auto industries. Construction companies slashed 29,000 positions last month, the most in more than three years. Factories sliced jobs for the fifth month in a row.

The economy, which has been losing steam all year, slowed to a pace of 2.2 percent in the July-to-September quarter. Growth in the October-to-December quarter and into early next year also is expected to be sluggish. Against this backdrop, the Federal Reserve, which had been steadily boosting interest rates for two years to thwart inflation, has left them alone since August. Many economists predict the Fed will keep its finger on the interest-rate pause button when it meets next Tuesday for its last session of the year.

Your Horoscope Says... Dec. 14-Dec. 20

ARIES

Enjoy the great insights you have in the area of career objectives. Take a look at what's out there! An unanticipated financial matter may arise; find the good in it. Somebody loves you and you know who. Make the call.

Soul Affirmation: A cheerful soul should be wrapped in a cheerful package.

Lucky Numbers: 15, 23, 35

TAURUS

Be cautious and conservative with money. You are extremely witty this week. Allow others to enjoy your good humor. Your leadership skills are very high, and others will follow. Be the leader of the pack.

Soul Affirmation: Luck is my best friend this week.

Lucky Numbers: 14, 20, 44

GEMINI

This is a good time for you to seek agreement on a plan that involves a relative. Take the time to remind your lover how much you care. Get a little sentimental if you have to. Don't be too critical of that softer side of your personality.

Soul Affirmation: Self-confidence is the key to my success this week.

Lucky Numbers: 2, 9, 19

CANCER

Push. Now is a good time to push. Your energy is higher than ever. Someone might get offended, but you can't please everyone. Hire a pro for something that you planned to do yourself, especially if expertise is involved.

Soul Affirmation: Success is mine because I feel successful.

Lucky Numbers: 5, 7, 12

LEO

Review your "to do" list again. You may need to slow down to discover something that you didn't realize while you were in the flow of events. Your lover is going to be a little difficult to understand. Back off if an argument arises.

Soul Affirmation: Two hats fit well on my big head.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 20, 32

VIRGO

Make a special effort to spend all week with your lover, husband or wife. Your sense of the importance of relationships is keen and this is a good time to strengthen your passionate partnership. Take your lover to a party. Devote attention.

Soul Affirmation: Change is my middle name.

Lucky Numbers: 12, 51, 52

LIBRA

The flock will come to you for direction. Give it gracefully. Know that your insights will help a lot if you deliver them in the right way. If you are a mother, guidance will be the best gift you can give others this week.

Soul Affirmation: Knowing I can do it is the biggest preparation for getting it done.

Lucky Numbers: 7, 11, 22

SCORPIO

Most people don't know how often dreams and reality blend into that practical consciousness of yours. Knowledge comes from a dream you've had lately. This week is a good week to get started making that dream a reality.

Soul Affirmation: My spirit gives me limitless possibilities.

Lucky Numbers: 9, 17, 52

SAGITTARIUS

Cooperation is key this week in your relationship with your partner. Even if you know you're right, let your partner have his or her way in the early going. Your staying power will give you influence or control in the late rounds.

Soul Affirmation: I let go and let the spirit run my life this week.

Lucky Numbers: 11, 39, 41

CAPRICORN

At home, projects flourish as family cooperates. They do love you and they are tired of being difficult. However, time spent by yourself leads to important insights. It's a favorable time for research and study.

Soul Affirmation: I let my luck work for me.

Lucky Numbers: 4, 24, 45

AQUARIUS

Lover, friends, relatives are in your corner. They just have a hard time verbalizing it. Their support gives you the boost you need if you'd swallow your pride and reach out for it. Their help may not come in the form you want it, but it is in the form you need.

Soul Affirmation: I find joy in facing responsibility this week.

Lucky Numbers: 10, 34, 37

PISCES

It wouldn't hurt to be a little less independent. Depend on someone. Declare a truce. Decide that you are not right. Elevate a friend's opinion to your guiding principle for this week. Compromise. Be a team player and watch the reward unfold.

Soul Affirmation: I calm my emotions by forgetting about the past.

Lucky Numbers: 24, 26, 54