

Labor/Community ALLIANCE

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20 ARRESTED AT GAP PROTEST

By: Janet Slagter

May 6th is a day to remember in Fresno labor rights and free speech history. On that Saturday, seventy peaceful people dared to walk through the Fashion Fair Mall parking lot carrying signs or leaflets, chanting "Hey, hey! Ho, ho! Sweatshop labor's got to go!" Protesters were a coalition of university, labor, and community groups, led by United Students Against Sweatshops, who broke the silence about the Gap corporation's use of sweatshop labor in Saipan, Mexico, Russia, Honduras and other locations. The forces of repression met the protesters. A police helicopter patrolled overhead while more than a hundred private and public security forces, some in riot helmets and some in plain clothes, cooperated to silence, remove, and arrest twenty of the demonstrators who refused to desist from exercising their free speech rights.

Security was itching to arrest anyone entering mall property as part of the demonstration. Mike Rhodes, editor of the Labor/Community Alliance newsletter, stood with a placard at the main mall entrance to direct participants to assemble on the Shaw Avenue sidewalk. He was immediately approached by the director of mall security and warned to leave or be arrested. Mike replied, "I intend to stand here and exercise my rights to free speech." The security director read the arrest statement and Mike was taken into custody by Fresno city police officers who accompanied the private security guards.

Meanwhile protesters gathered on the public sidewalk and decided to march together to the building's main entrance. They were carrying posters advertising the Gap's employment practices and fliers describing workers' conditions. One man wore a large paper maché Uncle Sam puppet. Even as they walked through the parking lot, security guards singled out individuals and began to read the prepared arrest warning. One group of people bravely decided to

risk arrest. They climbed the steps to the entrance and linked arms. Each was wearing a T-shirt with a duct tape letter on the back. Collectively they spelled out "Gap=sweatshop." These people were arrested one by one as supporters chanted, "Down with the Gap, Free Speech!" In a moment of true irony, "Uncle Sam" was arrested and the puppet seized. All were handcuffed and kept standing around for half an hour before they were transported to Ahwanee Middle School to be processed and cited.

At the school the eighteen adults arrested were cited for trespassing. Two women under eighteen were released without citation. One woman who refused to give her name to the police and one man who was not carrying identification were taken downtown and identified through fingerprints, cited, and released.

Despite demonstrators' completely peaceful demeanor, police were over-prepared for violence and resistance. Besides the helicopter and riot preparations, they had a "PAL" bus and several vans waiting in a cordoned off area of the parking lot to carry demonstrators to Ahwanee Middle School where more police were standing by. Inside the mall, both uniformed and plain-clothes officers followed people around and talked to each other on their cell phones and police radios. One person arrested estimated sixty police at Ahwanee School. Participants and onlookers were amazed at the massive public expenditure for police protection of corporations from people's speech.

FRESNO BACKGROUND

Owners of the Fashion Fair mall and the GAP want to gag criticism of their corporate practices. As this newsletter reported in its May edition, more than one hundred people met at the Fashion Fair Mall on March 29th and peacefully protested the Gap's labor policies. When the mall threatened arrests, Fresno police refused to arrest people for carrying signs and distributing leaflets. The protest was so successful, despite a news blackout by the Fresno Bee, that in April, local mall management received word

(Continued on page 10)



Photo by: Pam Whalen

(Continued from page 1)

from its corporate headquarters that such an event must never happen again. The mall's LA lawyers sent letters threatening arrests in future demonstrations to all the organizations that participated in the March action. Mall managers met with the Fresno Police to convince them to enforce mall policy. Anti-sweatshop organizers also met repeatedly with mall security and the Fresno Police to negotiate another peaceful protest. But Fresno Police reversed their position and agreed that when the mall's private security guards performed citizens' arrests on demonstrators for trespassing, the Fresno Police Department would honor those arrests.

THE ANTI-SWEATSHOP CAMPAIGN

In a two-year old campaign, human rights organizations and unions are calling on GAP Inc, owner of Gap, Old Navy, and Banana Republic labels and the second largest clothing manufacturer and retailer in the world, to STOP its sweatshop abuses around the world. GAP Inc. can begin by settling the Saipan Lawsuit and agreeing to include a "Living Wage" in their Code of Vendor Conduct, and agreeing to have independent monitors watch their factories for compliance with wage, hour, and working conditions requirements. In January, 1999, Global Exchange and other organizations filed suit against GAP among other clothing corporations for their labor and human rights abuses in the US territory of Saipan. GAP is one of only four corporations that have not signed the agreement and the largest buyer of Saipan sweatshop products. In Saipan, workers are charged thousands of dollars in recruitment fees for low-paying jobs, forced to work overtime without overtime pay, and forbidden to organize unions. Millard Drexler, GAP Inc. CEO, made \$172.8 million last year. This is approximately \$60,000 an hour. Compare this with the 28 cents that workers in Tehuacan, Mexico make, the 11 cents that workers in Russia make, or the \$3.05 that workers in Saipan make. GAP can afford to pay their workers a living wage!

WHAT'S NEXT? KEEPING THE PRESSURE ON THE GAP

At a recent planning meeting, participants decided to continue protesting GAP Inc.'s practices. The next informational picket will be held Saturday, June 3rd at noon. This time picketers will gather on the sidewalk at the Gap's Old Navy store in Clovis. Its location is 115 Shaw Avenue, just east of Villa. It is time to call attention to Old Navy as well as Gap stores. The store's location on a public sidewalk means people can exercise their rights to picket and speak out. To prepare for this event, people interested in participating are invited to a sign-making workshop at the Fresno Center for Non-Violence, 985 North Van Ness, and June 1st at 6:30 PM. Another tactic being pursued is to secure tables at Fashion Fair Mall from which to distribute literature about sweatshop practices and collect signatures on petitions to end the Gap's sweatshops. United Students Against Sweatshops will apply for tables for Sunday, June 4th and calls on other individuals and community groups to apply for tables on successive days. USAS will provide literature and petitions to anyone interested in joining the campaign to turn up the pressure on the GAP. Call (559) 233-3978 for information.

WHAT'S NEXT? COURT DATE

Everyone cited has been given a court date of July 5th at 8:30 AM. Protesters are urging community supporters to attend the hearing. They are considering alternatives. If charges are pressed they plan to plead innocent to the trespassing charge and ask for a jury trial. Will they defend themselves? Rely on legal counsel?

Supporters with legal knowledge, time, and an interest in fighting for free speech rights are encouraged to lend a hand in the case. This is an opportunity to defend workers and the freedom of speech and assembly!

WHAT ABOUT FREE SPEECH?

Do we have free speech rights in shopping centers? According to a US Supreme Court decision (Pruneyard) in 1980, we have rights to distribute leaflets and circulate petitions in malls, which have become the new town plazas. Malls, however, can set "time, place, and manner" rules that limit access. Fashion Fair's extremely limiting rules are obviously designed to be so restrictive and burdensome that political activists decide it is not worth the effort. Their most restrictive rules require that activity be confined to a table they provide, that there can be no more than two professional quality placards taped to the table, that no sign or leaflet interfere with the commercial purpose of the mall or its tenants, that the name of every person who will participate will be listed on the application, that the person who signs the application signs for the behavior of all other participants, and that the mall must approve the content of all signs, leaflets, and petitions to be used. Many of these provisions need to be challenged and the defense of these eighteen people can become an opportunity to lift these restrictions on speech for all shopping centers in California!



Protesters rename Fashion Fair after protest at the GAP

For more GAP photos see our website at:
www.fresnoalliance.com/home/gaphotos.htm

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