

The New York Times
November 8, 2005

Workers Are Pressing Gillette Over Conditions at Packaging Plants

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

LAWRENCE, Mass. - Marcelino Hiciano, a 56-year-old Dominican immigrant, complains that he packed Gillette razors for four and a half years as a temporary worker but was never hired as a permanent employee.

Another Dominican, Ines Roque, 34, said a temp agency had sometimes told her to report to a packaging plant 45 minutes from her home. But when she arrived, she was occasionally sent home without pay, told there were already enough workers for the day.

Fiordaliza Taveras said the agency that sent her to pack razors cheated her of two weeks' pay, which she did not receive until she complained to the Massachusetts attorney general.

The three immigrants are among scores of workers who complain that Gillette has gone too far in relying on temporary workers, a practice that they say is fostering poverty, destabilizing families and undercutting communities. Gillette was bought this year by the Procter & Gamble Company.

These workers have joined a campaign by the Merrimack Valley Project, a coalition of religious, community and labor groups, to press Gillette to improve wages and conditions for 1,000 temporary workers at two razor-packaging plants. Many months, the temps account for two-thirds of the plants' work force.

"I blame Gillette for everything that goes on with its contractors," said Ms. Taveras, who received \$568.86 in back pay after the attorney general intervened. "If I have someone living in my house, I have to be responsible for what that person does."

The Merrimack group has held protests at the company's headquarters in Boston, complained to the state attorney general about wage violations, and gotten politicians and pastors to speak out.

The group's message is that Gillette's business model - subcontracting its packaging operations and relying on temporary employment agencies that until recently paid \$8.10 an hour - is hurting hundreds of immigrant families in Lawrence, a city of hulking but largely deserted apparel factories that had its heyday nearly a century ago.

"With all these temp jobs, there's no stability in the community," said the Rev. Jim Dukowski of St. Patrick's Church in Lowell, a leader in the campaign criticizing Gillette. "Survival becomes the main issue in their lives. They earn so little that many have to take second and third jobs, and they just don't have enough time to give to their children."

A Gillette spokesman, Eric Kraus, said the company was looking into labor practices at the plants, which are run by two packaging contractors, Sonoco and Markson Rosenthal, both in Fort Devens, a former Army base 23 miles southwest of Lawrence. Mr. Kraus said that a law firm hired to investigate the matter would issue a detailed report in November.

"We expect all of our vendors to conduct business to the highest ethical standard, the same high standard we hold Gillette to," he said. "We stress that this is their responsibility to implement and enforce."

Mr. Kraus said Gillette had subcontracted its packaging operations to companies with more expertise in that area so it could concentrate on manufacturing razors and blades.

Allan V. Cecil, a senior vice president at Sonoco, said that reports of workplace abuses were unfounded and that his company had no intention of rethinking its heavy reliance on temporary workers.

"It's a business model that requires a temp work force," Mr. Cecil said. "A year ago last October, we had zero temps, and then it can go to 700, 800. There are dramatically big swings depending on the workload."

No one from Markson Rosenthal responded to interview requests.

Mr. Hiciano, a doctor who left the Dominican Republic five years ago to seek a more prosperous life, said it was unfair for employees to work year after year on a temporary basis. He said Sonoco's managers had repeatedly told him they would not employ him as a permanent worker because he did not speak English. But he said that many permanent employees knew little English.

"A temp worker doesn't have secure work, doesn't have health insurance or many benefits," he said in Spanish. "Some weeks you work only three, four days. If you're a temp and you make a mistake, they let you go. If you're a permanent worker and you make a mistake, they take you aside and tell you how to do it better."

Mr. Hiciano said he had remained at the plant for more than four years because he could not find work elsewhere. He was fired last March - in retaliation, he says, for speaking out for better wages and conditions. Company officials say they fired him for shoving another worker.

Like many temp workers at the packaging plants, Mr. Hiciano said his pay had remained at \$8.10 an hour for four years. Facing pressure from the Merrimack Valley Project, the temp agencies recently raised the rate to \$8.32 an hour.

Some workers said they were often not paid for hours worked. Others said that when they were injured on the job, workers' compensation did not pay for doctors' visits, and the companies did not pay them for the time they took off to recover.

Many workers also complained about the high cost of commuting. They said they often had to pay van owners \$30 or \$35 a week, about 10 percent of their take-home pay, to drive them to the packaging plants.

They also said they were required to show up for afternoon shifts at 2:40 p.m. even though the company did not start paying them until 2:50, when their shift began. "If you show up at 2:41 they'll send you home for the day even though the shift begins at 2:50," said Fabio Morales, a packaging worker.

Mr. Morales became involved in the Gillette campaign after he met an evangelical pastor while picking up food at a church food pantry.

"As a consequence of his low pay, he was forced to go to a charity," said the pastor, the Rev. Victor Jarvis, who is active in the Merrimack Valley Project. "We want to pressure Gillette about this, and we know that Gillette wants to preserve its good reputation."

Mr. Kraus, the Gillette spokesman, said the company's vice chairman had met with leaders of the Merrimack group to address their concerns. He said Gillette had made sure that workers received bilingual manuals about their rights and that supervisors were receiving more training to deal with a variety of job-related issues. In addition, the company is studying whether it can use more permanent workers and provide English courses.

The Merrimack Project's lead organizer, Loren McArthur, said that Gillette and the employment agencies were responding to complaints about missing pay, but that Gillette needed to help ensure that workers could express grievances without worrying about losing their jobs.

"It's important that the end user, Gillette, take responsibility on these issues," Mr. McArthur said. "There has been some progress, but the ultimate measure of whether things have improved is the workers' experience, and on that measure we have more work to do."

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