

## PUERTO RICO

# Fishermen take on the Navy

By Ronnie Lovler

VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO

**T**HIS SANDY LITTLE ISLAND OF beautiful beaches and clear blue water is hardly the sort of place where you would expect a small group of fishermen to take on the might of the U.S. Navy.

Still, not too long ago, a flotilla of 30 fishing boats kept the U.S. Marines from landing on this tiny island, less than 50 square miles large, on the opening day of naval exercises scheduled here by North Atlantic Treaty Organizations (NATO) countries.

The fishermen were protesting the target practices and other naval activities held over the years, which they say have consistently disrupted the fabric of life on this island-municipality, a few miles off the coast of eastern Puerto Rico.

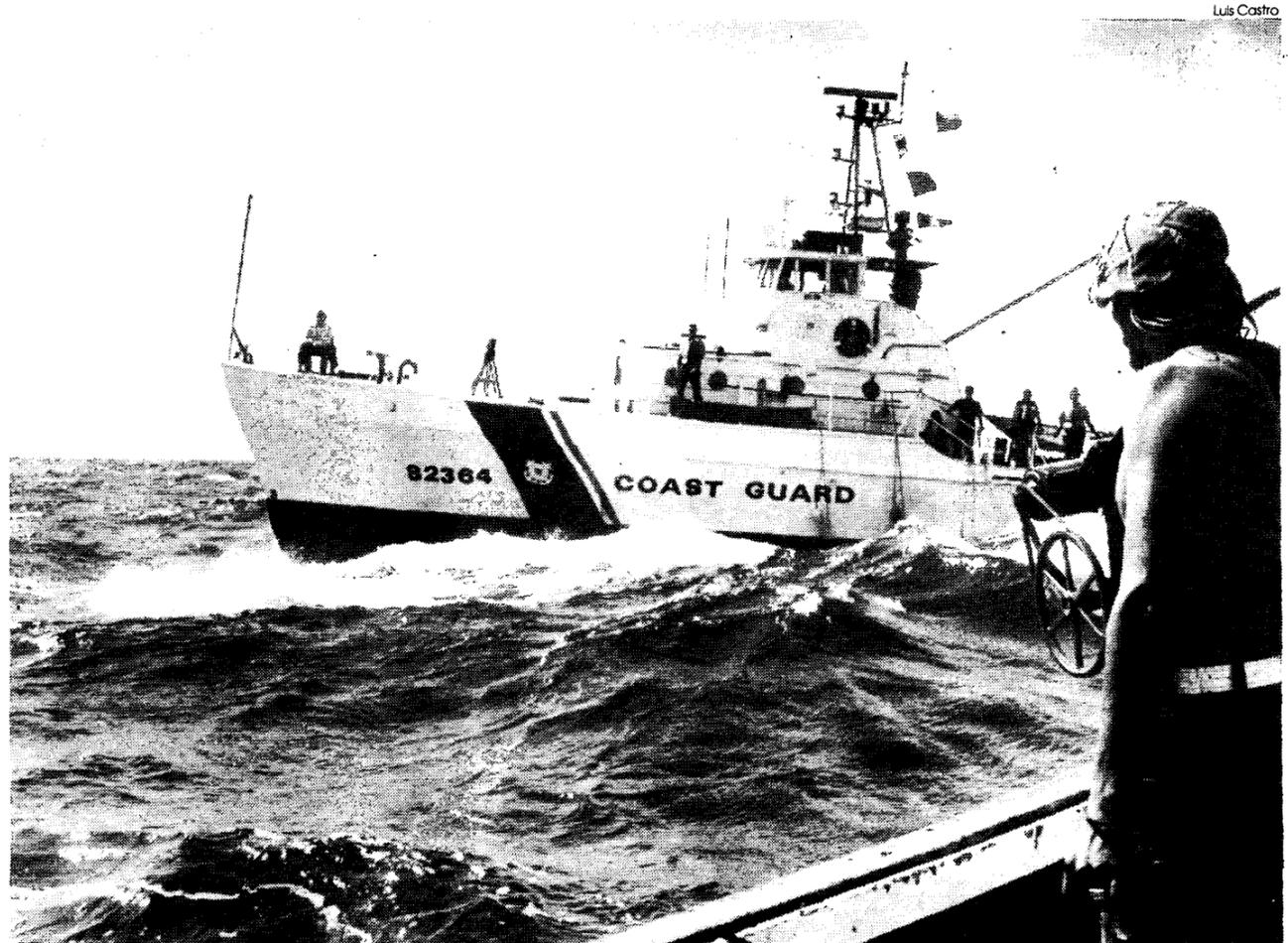
The fish-in lasted only a few hours but it was a gesture that dramatized the feelings of all the Viequeses—they wanted the Navy, which currently occupies 75 percent of Vieques, off their island.

The unusual protest was precipitated by a Navy mandate limiting the fishermen to certain waters during NATO's Operation Springboard maneuvers. Until a few years ago the Navy had conducted its annual maneuvers, as well as constant ship-to-shore target practice, off the coast of the sister island-municipality of Culebra, a few miles east.

Years of protest in Culebra and months of talks by the Puerto Rican government forced the Navy to close up shop in Culebra. A condition of that accord was that the Puerto Rican government would help the Navy find an alternate target practice site. Although several locations have been found, including the uninhabited, British-owned Dog Island in the Caribbean, the Navy has dragged its heels, while at the same time beefing up its Vieques operation.

The Viequeses were concerned that military operations on their island might leave them with a legacy like that of Culebra, where environmental protection authorities have detected an unusual environmental hazard—hundreds of unexploded live mines both on the land and in coastal waters.

The fish-in was a staged event. The Vieques Fishermen's Association had invited journalists, religious leaders, lawyers and political figures to witness the occurrences. The fishermen and their friends gathered in the early morning hours near



Years of protest on the island of Culebra and pressure from the Puerto Rican government forced the Navy to give up operations there, but they merely shifted them to Vieques. The Viequeses would have none of it.

the moorings where the fishing boats were kept. At about 7:00 a.m. the fishing vessels, with three or four persons on board, moved out to take on the U.S. Navy.

They positioned themselves in the restricted waters between six NATO ships carrying Marines and amphibious equipment and the shore.

Four times the NATO ships tried to cut through the line formed by the fishing boats but four times the people aboard the small motor boats kept the ships from going through.

During the confrontations, a 35-foot lobster boat, the fishermen's pride and joy, was damaged in what the Navy said was an accident. A Coast Guard cutter collided with the fishing boat in heavy seas. However, the fishermen said that the lobster boat was rammed by the cutter three times.

Still, by the day's end, the fishermen and the Viequeses felt that victory was theirs. "We beat the hell out of them today," said Carlos Zenon, captain of the

damaged lobster boat and a former president of the Fishermen's Association.

The victory was theirs, for the time being, not only because they succeeded in temporarily halting the NATO maneuvers but because they were able to set in motion a chain of events geared at getting the Navy out of Vieques once and for all.

The latest move, in a series of escalating initiatives is a decision by Gov. Carlos Romero Barcelo to seek a U.S. District Court injunction to permanently halt all naval operations on Vieques. The injunction includes a 53-page document that alleges the island has been damaged by "bombings, missile firing, demolition operations, mortar firing and other military activities." These activities are said to be hampering economic development, endangering residents and causing damage to marine life and natural resources.

The court ruling is still pending. It takes an issue like Vieques to unite the politically divided people of Puerto

Rico. They are often at odds with each other as to the best solution for their present status as a colony—statehood, independence or autonomy.

The status preferences usually translate into conflicting political positions on current issues. However, in the Vieques situation all shades of the political spectrum in Puerto Rico appear to be united in their wish to have the Navy leave the island.

That is perhaps the fishermen's greatest victory.

Ronnie Lovler is a free-lance journalist and former reporter for the San Juan Star.

As IN THESE TIMES went to press, President Carter, under pressure from Gov. Carlos Romero Barcelo of Puerto Rico, cancelled the 30,000 men military exercises that had been set for May 5 on the island of Vieques.

Puerto Rico is still seeking a court injunction prohibiting all military maneuvers in Vieques.

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**Congressman Ron Dellums**

Copies of the studies are available from the Transnational Institute, 1901 Q St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009.

**The Counterforce Syndrome—\$2.50**  
**Dubious Specter—\$1.50**

# J. P. STEVENS' DAY WILL COME

## Organizing Stevens in Alabama requires a spirit that just may transform the union

By Emma Lee

MONTGOMERY, ALA.

**W**HEN HENRY MANN SITS at the lunch counter at the Montgomery Howard Johnson's motel, where he's been living for a year and a half, and talks about his work, his gentle Alabama drawl is often barely audible. After ten years of union organizing in the Deep South, his hushed delivery is a well-practiced art.

"I believe there's only one way to organize and that's militancy," says Mann. "You show me a worker who's willing to stand up to his supervisor and I'll show you a strong union member and a militant local union. You show me a union that won't strike, and I'll show you a weak union."

Mann has been a union organizer since 1967, nine of those years on the staff of the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA). In June 1976 the TWUA was forced by declining membership to merge with the older, larger and better established Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America to form the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), and Mann went to work on ACTWU's drive to organize J.P. Stevens & Co. Organizing activity is now underway in virtually all of Stevens' 85 plants, which with a few exceptions are located in the South; the union has already succeeded in signing up majorities in 18 plants.

Henry Mann's rhetoric, and the manner in which he has gone about organizing the 450 workers at Stevens' West Boylston plant in Montgomery, indicate the potentially progressive impact of the Stevens campaign on the labor movement.

The successful resolution of the Stevens drive may result in a massive influx into the union of mostly young, militant workers whose experience with unionism has been characterized from the outset by bitter struggle against "the bosses." In Montgomery, at least, the workers subscribe to the rhetoric of social justice and struggle that the union must employ to win the Stevens campaign; they may not forget it once they join the union.

### A crusade for social justice.

Mann has conducted more than a simple organizing drive in Montgomery. It has been a crusade, a campaign for social justice. The workers' fight to win basic rights in the mill has led to profound changes in the participants.

In short, the social values and regulations that have dominated the South for generations are being undermined by the West Boylston workers. Racial and sexual divisions within the workforce are being broken down, and a sense of the common struggle of all "working people" has begun to develop. Most important, the workers now believe that they have the ability and power to control their lives, both in and out of the workplace. Despite their involvement in what promises to be a lengthy, complicated battle for their bargaining rights, their spirit and determination remain high.

Willie Woods, an electrician for 13 years in the West Boylston mill, explained the changes the workers have undergone in this way: "I would think that they know that as a team they have more power than they knew about, or they was told about way before. They're using their

power more today. As a whole, as a working whole, well, we can get a lot more done than if we was by ourselves."

Marva Watkins, a young black woman who was one of the first workers fired for union activity in Montgomery, adds: "The union changes everything. It brings people closer together."

Mann says that when he first arrived in Montgomery in July 1976 and set up camp in the Howard Johnson's across town from the mill, the workers were weak and inert. "When I first got here," he recalls, "I never seen such a beaten bunch of people in my life. They didn't have no hope, no future, no nothing. They knew the company was doin' them wrong, but they didn't know what to do."

Conditions at West Boylston were among the worst of any plant in the Stevens chain. Employees got only four of the six paid holidays accorded to most other Stevens workers. There was no parking lot and no lunchroom; the workers tell of eating lunch amidst the cotton dust and lint of the mill. There were no medical facilities in the plant to speak of, no health insurance or pension plan. Some 60 percent of the workers were black but there were no black supervisors; 70 percent were women but there were no women supervisors. They received one week paid vacation, regardless of seniority.

Not surprisingly, the response to Mann's initial leafletting of the plant was strong. Seventy workers signed the 3-by-5-inch blue union authorization cards immediately, and by early September 1976 a majority had indicated their desire to have ACTWU as their bargaining representative. On Sept. 10 the union filed with the NLRB to be declared bargaining representative.

Stevens immediately claimed it had a "good faith" doubt that the union actually had won majority support. The company began a campaign of harassment. According to a complaint issued in May 1977 on behalf of the Montgomery workers by the New Orleans regional office of the NLRB—this complaint is currently being litigated before an administrative law judge in Montgomery—the first illegal firing of a pro-union worker took place on Aug. 19, 1976. By October the wave of firings and harassments was in full swing. Even in recent months, although the NLRB hearing has been in session on and off since last August, the company continues to fire and harass the workers.

The NLRB has already alleged labor law violations in the case of 19 fired workers, and cited scores of other cases of harassment and discriminatory treatment.

### Avoiding an election.

At this point in the Stevens campaign it is the union's strategy to avoid risking representation elections, and to rely instead on legal action to advance the organizing. A lost election could have disastrous effects on the campaign. In Wallace, N.C., and Statesboro, Ga., the company successfully frightened the workers into voting down the union even though a majority had signed cards. It is unlikely that this would happen in Montgomery, but ACTWU is sticking to its tactic of amassing enough labor law violations in each organizing campaign to persuade the courts to declare it legal bargaining agent without an election.

But if the strategic initiative now lies



in the hands of the ACTWU legal department, who along with the government attorneys are arguing the workers' case in Montgomery, Mann has sought to prevent the workers from being forced to the sidelines, to watch passively as others act in their behalf. Organizing activity has proceeded alongside legal activity, and the workers continue to meet weekly, as they have for more than a year. Average attendance runs about 60 or 70, although important meetings have drawn more than twice that number.

Mann's organizing tactic has been to assist the workers in creating a community of solidarity and struggle. Organizing a union is seen not only as an attempt to win higher wages and better working conditions, but as a collective effort to win some measure of control over the workers' environment.

The workers have thus organized a political action committee to register new voters. They have organized a food stamp committee to ensure that their members are receiving the government assistance to which they are entitled. They are planning to put out a newsletter, and have organized a group that sings union songs. They signed up 85 workers to make the six-hour trip to Spartanburg, S.C., on

November 20, for a giant rally of Stevens workers from throughout the South. And with the help of an organizer for the Carolina Brown Lung Association they are working on setting up a brown lung clinic.

"You're more than an organizer," Mann says of his own task. "You don't teach them the union can do wonders. You teach these people that coming together they can do wonders."

### Embryonic class solidarity.

What has emerged from the careful building of this community of struggle is an unmistakable, if embryonic, sense of class solidarity. In the Deep South that means above all overcoming the racial tensions that have historically divided white and black members of the working class.

Mann says that at one of the first meetings he held with the workers in Montgomery he warned that the company would quickly resort to racism to thwart the unionization drive. Stevens has often sought to label the union a "nigger union" in order to frighten away white workers.

"We're down here to organize employees and workers," Mann recalls telling the workers at a meeting. "The company

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