



Harris-Teeter targeted by Smithfield protesters

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DATELINE: RALEIGH N.C.

A protest against working conditions at a Bladen County packing plant reached across North Carolina this weekend.

Demonstrators in 11 cities urged the Harris-Teeter grocery chain to drop Smithfield Foods products until the Smithfield, Va.-based company addresses allegations that its employees have been mistreated.

The pickets showed up Saturday at Harris-Teeter groceries from Asheville to Wilmington, choosing the grocery chain because it is based in North Carolina.

The Southern Faith, Labor and Community Alliance, a coalition of faith-based and community organizations from North Carolina, organized the protest with the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union.

The Washington-based union has tried unsuccessfully for years to organize workers at the Smithfield Packing Co. plant in Tar Heel, the world's largest pork processing factory.

The factory's 5,500 workers slaughter and disassemble 32,000 hogs per day, according to protest organizers.

Smithfield workers in Tar Heel voted in 1994 and 1997 against unionizing, but a federal appeals court ruled in May that the company harassed employees, threatened wage freezes and fired some union supporters before those elections.

In Raleigh, state NAACP president the Rev. William Barber joined protesters at a grocery downtown who bought a few products inside first to demonstrate that they are paying customers.

"We didn't buy any ham," Barber told more than 100 demonstrators outside. "We care about where our pork comes from. We will not swallow Smithfield pork that is packaged with worker abuse."

Saturday's demonstrations came about two weeks after hundreds of Smithfield workers walked off their jobs for two days to protest firings and working conditions that they say are abusive and dangerous.

Events will be organized at other grocery chains that sell products from the Tar Heel plant, Libby Manly of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union said at a demonstration in Asheville.

Harris Teeter's corporate offices in Matthews issued a statement Thursday in advance of the protests, saying the company "respects employees' rights to engage in concerted and union activities or, likewise, to refrain from doing so."

"To that end, any issues that may arise between Smithfield, their employees and labor organizations must be resolved between and among those respective parties," it said.

Bill Orlando talked briefly with demonstrators outside a Harris-Teeter in Hickory, saying afterward that he could see both sides of the debate because he worked as a rehabilitation counselor and consultant on workers compensation cases in Florida before he moved to North Carolina.

"I can see an employer's point of view," he said. "Once they are injured, it's difficult to place them in another job."

But, he added: "I think the word needs to get out if a company is abusing the system like this."