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Union, in Organizing Fight, Tangles With Celebrity Cook



Ken Cedeno for The New York Times

As Paula Deen of the Food Network spoke inside, demonstrators protested Wednesday in Washington.

By [MARIAN BURROS](#)

WASHINGTON, April 19 — Paula Deen, the Food Network's ebullient queen of butter-drenched Southern cooking, has found herself in the middle of a dispute between Smithfield Foods Inc. and a union that has long tried to organize one of the company's pork processing plants.

As part of a national campaign to win support for its effort, the union, the United Food and Commercial Workers, is trying to get Ms. Deen to sever her ties to Smithfield, for which she has been a paid spokeswoman since last fall.

Within the growing world of food-celebrity endorsements, Ms. Deen is the first personality to have become entangled in such a fight.

The latest round of it took place on Wednesday night at the National Museum of Natural History here, where Ms. Deen, on a national book tour, made an appearance before a sold-out crowd.

Outside, as promised, about two dozen people supporting unionization of the huge plant, in Tar Heel, N.C., held a prayer vigil as the audience arrived. Inside, as Ms. Deen responded later to questions that had been submitted to her in writing, a member of the union tried to speak to her from the audience and deliver a letter. That woman, Leila McDowell, and a former Smithfield worker, Lenore Bailey, were swiftly ushered out by museum guards.

Ms. Deen, for her part, issued a news release in which she said, “Now, I’m not an expert on the union situation but here’s what I do know: I know the folks at Smithfield care about their employees and work hard to support the communities where they live, work and raise their families.”

In 2004, the [National Labor Relations Board](#) found that Smithfield, through threats, spying and firings, had prevented fairness in a 1997 election in which the union failed to organize the Tar Heel plant. A federal appeals court upheld the decision last year, concluding that Smithfield had engaged in “intense and widespread coercion” and ordering reinstatement of four fired workers, one of whom had been beaten by the plant’s police on the day of the election.

The effort to speak with Ms. Deen on Wednesday followed a letter to her from the North Carolina Council of Churches describing conditions at the plant and suggesting that she would not have signed with Smithfield if she had known about them. Quoting a report based on data from the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#), it said worker injuries were up 200 percent since 2003. The company says its injury rate is no different from the industry average.

The union says it will continue to demonstrate against Ms. Deen, though on a larger scale, wherever she goes on her book tour.