Workers Are Pressing Gillette Over Conditions at Packaging Plants

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

LAWRENCE, Mass. — Marcellino Hicino, a 45-year-old Dominicans 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, Jesus Roca, 4, said a temp agency had sometimes told him to report to a packaging plant 48 minutes from his home. But when he arrived, he was sometimes sent home without pay, told there were already enough workers for the day.

Fidelis Taveras said the agency that sent her to pack razors charged her for 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, de-moralizing families and undercutting communities. Gillette was bought this year by the Procter & Gamble company.

These workers have joined a campaign by the Murrinack Valley Project, a coalition of religious, community and labor groups, to press Gillette to improve wages and conditions for its 1,800 temporary workers at two-manufacturing plants in Lawrence, Mass.

"I blame Gillette for everything it goes wrong with its contractors," said Ms. Taveras, who received $6,000 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 Murrinack Valley Project has held protests at the company’s headquarters in Boston, complaining to the state attorney general about wage violations, and getting 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 are paid by the hour — is dangerous and harmful to communities.

"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 came to 300, 400. There are dramatically big swings depending on the workload."

No one from Procter & Gamble or the Gillette spokesperson responded to interview requests.

Mr. Hicino, 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.

He said that many permanent employees had told him the same.

"A temp worker doesn’t have a secure work, doesn’t have health insurance or many benefits," he said in Spanish. "Some weeks we 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. Hicino said he remained at the plant for more than four years because he could not find work elsewhere. He was fired last March — he says, in retaliation for speaking out — for what he calls better wages and conditions.

The project’s organizers want to keep the temp agencies from raising the rate to $8.32 an hour.

Temporary workers cite lack of benefits and pay irregularities.

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.

"It’s important that the end user, Gillette, take responsibility on these issues," Mr. Marchant said. "There has been some progress, but the ultimate measure of whether things have improved is the workers’ experience, not the measure we have more work to do."