

LABOR NOTES

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Women Confront Ugly Harassment At Beauty Products Plant



Chicago Workers' Collaborative

by Bianca Cunningham

At a lotion factory outside Chicago, workers endured years of sexual harassment, coercion, gender and racial discrimination, and unsafe working conditions.

Last year the women at Voyant Beauty came together to fight back.

The workers at Voyant are

Bosses wanted only Latinas, no African Americans.

overwhelmingly female, and almost all long-term temps. They blend, bottle, pack, and ship beauty products for brands like Victoria's Secret, Johnson & Johnson, and Aveeno.

BLACK WORKERS SHUT OUT

Before the organizing came a hiring discrimination lawsuit, filed in 2012.

At that point Voyant had a workforce of 100, hired through three local temp agencies. The workers were nearly all

Latina—even though the factory was located in a majority-African American neighborhood where many Black workers were trying to find jobs.

The temps who filed the lawsuit alleged that they had been skipped over for hire at Voyant solely because of their race. The complaint named Vee Pack Industries (aka Voyant Beauty) along with the temp agencies.

In depositions, the owners of the temp agencies admitted that the plant managers had made known their bias against Black workers, supposedly on the grounds that Black workers never stayed long.

The owner of one of the agencies, Alternative Staffing, admitted that when he had first obtained the plant's business around 1999, a manager had asked him to send young, good-looking Latinas with large breasts to work at Voyant.

The request came from a plant manager in charge of staffing and work assignments. When the agency sent

women who did not fit the description, he would mark them as "do not return."

The owner described one time when the agency had driven some African American workers over to the factory in a van to fill a late request for labor. The workers were chased away by a manager who screamed at them to "get [their] Black asses out of here."

In 2018, the court ruled in the workers' favor. It found that Vee Pack and the three agencies were all guilty of steering African American workers away from the factory, leaving a workforce of Latinas. As a result of the ruling, African American workers now make up around 20 percent of the workforce at Voyant. These workers are normally assigned to second shift and have high turnover.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

After the appalling details of the lawsuit became public, organizers at a worker center called the Chicago Workers' Collaborative reached out to women working at Voyant. Given Voyant's hiring practices, CWC was betting that the workers were experiencing harassment.

Organizers first tried visiting the factory and the temp agencies to talk to workers, but they got nowhere. Then they tried reaching out through Facebook—and started to receive messages that the women wanted to meet.

The first meeting was last May;

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around 30 workers came. The women's complaints ranged from not getting breaks to suffering verbal abuse. But the organizers still had a feeling that there was more under the surface, so they asked about sexual harassment. Eventually workers began sharing stories about their experiences.

The women described how managers sexually harassed them, forcing them into an awful choice. The women who went along with it—up to and including tolerating sexual assault—often got placed on safer lines or given safety equipment. The women who resisted their managers' advances would often be put on lines that required more excruciating labor, or asked not to return to Voyant at all.

"I was extremely happy when my co-workers came together," said Ana Maria Jasso, a 16-year temp worker at Voyant. "Once we started to work with CWC, it was about more than just a single workplace," she added. "It was about the fact that we felt like someone was finally listening and treating us like human beings."

Before the meeting ended, the workers had elected eight co-workers, all hired through Alternative Staffing, to an organizing committee. They decided to demand a meeting with the abusive plant managers and the owner of Vee Pack.

OWNER DODGES MEETING

To prepare for the meeting, the workers came up with a list of demands including clean bathrooms, access to clean drinking water, 15-minute breaks, safety equipment, paid lunch breaks, and respect for the seniority of longtime employees.

They also began circulating a petition about the ongoing sexual harassment. Fifty workers signed it. In July, the women piled into cars with community supporters from groups like Warehouse Workers for Justice and delivered the petition to Voyant's corporate office.

Workers drew up a list of demands and a petition against sexual harassment.

On the spot, with a big group confronting him, the owner agreed to meet with the workers that Friday. But after everyone had gone, he called the committee to say he only had eight minutes to meet and they should meet with the

temp agencies instead.

The next week the workers protested in front of the plant, holding signs that described the dirty bathrooms or simply said, "Hands off." They continued to demand a meeting.

The next week, all eight workers on the organizing committee were fired by the temp agency. Or rather, they were told there was no work for them. They had all been "temps" at Voyant for many years; the longest, for 26 years. The staffing agency didn't even call the women; they were let go by text message.

In response to the illegal firing, the workers and the worker center filed a charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, citing sexual harassment, a hostile work environment, and retaliation.

TOOK IT TO THE BRAND

But they didn't stop organizing. Next they rallied outside one of Chicago's busiest Victoria's Secret locations, at the Magnificent Mile Mall. The workers handed customers a flyer that said:

"Tell Victoria's Secret to protect workers who pack their lotion from sexual harassment and racial slurs!"

A couple days later, the women were called back individually by one of the temp agencies, which attempted to offer them assignments at other workplaces. The women refused, citing how long they been on the assignment at Voyant and requesting to be returned to their original jobs.

They filed another complaint of gender discrimination and retaliation, this time with the National Labor Relations Board.

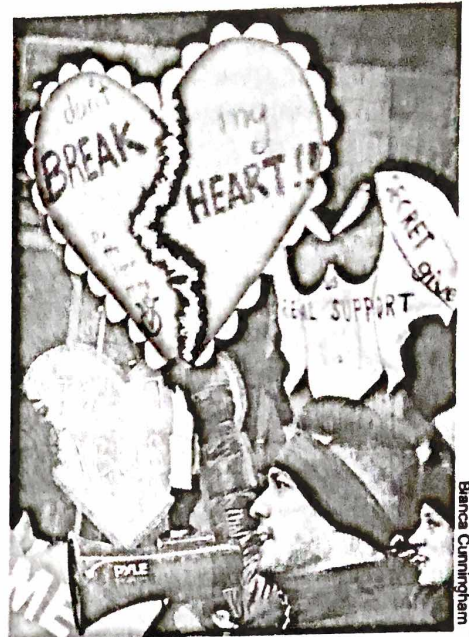
The NLRB upheld the women's charge of retaliation. It awarded them their jobs back, plus back pay with interest, and ordered Voyant not to retaliate by cutting their hours or pay going forward.

SOME DEMANDS MET

When the leaders returned to work, they saw a new notice posted,



Chicago Workers' Collaborative



Bianca Cunningham

Fashion models and factory workers teamed up February 14 to confront Victoria's Secret over workplace sexual harassment.

announcing that Voyant Beauty would now give temp employees 10-minute breaks. The bathrooms were clean, and there was clean drinking water. One of the abusive managers had been fired.

But the women still didn't feel safe, because there was no training or policy to address the rampant workplace harassment. So they kept agitating. They organized another protest at Voyant's corporate office. This time they were joined by a congressional hopeful, Marie Newman, who brought plenty of local press with her.

The Labor Board found retaliation and gave the women back their jobs with back pay.

Voyant agreed to meet with the worker leaders and attorneys from the NLRB and EEOC. The meeting finally took place in November.

When the women went to the meeting, they brought the codes of conduct for Johnson & Johnson and The Limited, the parent corporation of Victoria's Secret. The Limited's supplier code of conduct forbids supplier factories to discriminate against workers and requires a healthy and safe work environment and respect for workers' freedom of association. The women asked Voyant to abide by these basic codes of conduct—and to do more.

The workers want regular meetings

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between labor and management about working conditions. They want monitoring by an outside women's organization. They want workers to get trained on the codes of conduct. And they want Voyant to give an annual update on working conditions to Johnson & Johnson and The Limited.

Negotiations are still ongoing with the NLRB and EEOC; other charges have been filed at both agencies since the first case was resolved.

Workers have also filed charges at the NLRB that the company is not respecting the terms agreed upon in the settlement. In November, December, and January, the women allege, Voyant cut their hours to 30 a week, when they used to work 50 to 60. The company has instead given the hours to new workers from a different temp agency.

New charges were filed in January by workers making similar claims of harassment against Staffing Network, another temp agency. EEOC charges of sexual harassment and gender discrimination were also filed against Voyant and three temp agencies.

The Illinois attorney general's office has opened its own investigation into Voyant. The resolution could include an outside monitor, and a requirement that temp agencies abide by the codes of conduct of the brands they work for. □

Mary Matthews / drawingdailyusa.com



Taking It to the Stage

To publicize their ongoing fight, the women organizing at Voyant have produced a short performance piece in the style of the "theater of the oppressed," where theater is used to promote social change and develop participants' sense of power. The goal is to enable these women workers to transform themselves into protagonists, instead of feeling like objects.

"The theater for me is something that was very important because I hadn't been able to express the frustration, pain, anger, and impotence," said Ana Maria Jasso, a 16-year temp worker at Voyant. "All of these feelings that we have inside of us as workers that are being exploited—it was burning inside of us. For those of us that have experienced sexual abuse, it helps to get it out.

"There are so many of us suffering silently," said Jasso. "I just wish that everyone would have the opportunity to organize and speak out."

Members of the Model Alliance, made up of fashion models organizing for better working conditions in their industry, coordinated protests on Valentine's Day with the

Voyant workers to bring shoppers' attention to their shared issues. They said Victoria's Secret has chosen to ignore appeals that it's #Time4RESPECT. The brand is being called on to change its culture of misogyny and abuse as depicted in a recent *New York Times* investigative report.

The two groups held actions in Los Angeles, New York City and Chicago. At the New York action, models shared stories about teenagers experiencing sexual abuse at work. They were also joined by farmworkers from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Dozens of workers picketed the Victoria's Secret in Herald Square, chanting "Victoria! The secret's out!"

At the Chicago action, the workers dramatized powerful workplace scenes in front of the Magnificent Mile/Gold Coast store, facilitated by Chicago performance artist Jasmin Cardenas.

The workers of Voyant Beauty will present their short performance piece at the 2020 Labor Notes Conference.

—Blanca Cunningham

Auto Reformers Go for Round Two

by Scott Houldieson

The good news is that 26 locals representing more than 60,000 Auto Workers (UAW) members have passed a resolution calling for a special convention to amend our union constitution and mandate the direct election of top officers. It's astonishing how quickly the momentum built.

The bad news is that we fell short of the requirement to reach 80,000 covered members by the February 21 deadline we had set for ourselves. We needed more time.

A BIGGER GOAL

We have a new resolution and a new deadline: February 19, 2021. So we now have one year to get this done.

We know we can do it. Technically we need the resolution to be passed by locals representing more than 20 percent of the UAW membership—about 80,000.

But we aren't settling for the minimum. Our goal is for as many locals as possible to pass it over the next year. We want to show the UAW officialdom, the federal government, and one another that the members are capable of running this union.

We also want to use that time to grow our reform group, Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD). We need to rebuild the fighting spirit of the union that launched the Flint sit-down strike, championed civil rights, and took on the most powerful companies in the world.

At any special convention, we'll have to overcome the power of the Administration Caucus, the ruling party that has lorded over our union like a one-party state for more than 70 years, bringing us concessions, corruption, and labor-management partnership schemes. That means going in strong and organized.

It's fitting that UAW Local 249—from the same city as the Super Bowl LIV Champions, the Kansas City Chiefs—has kicked off round two by passing the new resolution. Local 249 represents more than 9,000 autoworkers, so we're already making large strides toward the goal.

NEXT STEPS

We are asking those who passed the original resolution to go back to your union meeting and pass an amendment.

We're also asking everyone who is interested in supporting this rank-and-file effort to become a member of UAWD through our website at UAWD.org, join our regular planning calls, and help us reach out to other local unions to pass the updated resolution.

[Scott Houldieson is an auto worker in UAW Local 551 and a member of UAWD.]