

**American unions are taking the fight for U.S. workers to European employers' home turf**  
**Business Week 2-15-2010**

Dateline: PARIS

Jetting off to Europe isn't exactly Genevieve Repsher's style. As a single mom earning \$9 an hour in the cafeteria at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., "I struggle to pay my bills," she says. But Repsher and a dozen other American employees of Paris-based food service group Sodexo traveled to the City of Light for the company's annual meeting on Jan.25 to protest its treatment of U.S. workers. At a hotel on the Place de la Republique, they handed out "Changing Sodexo, Changing Lives" T-shirts to cheering French supporters.

With some 5.5 million Americans employed by foreign-owned companies, U.S. unions are targeting employers on their home turf. They're teaming up with local unions and mounting publicity campaigns to win better treatment for Americans. The Service Employees International Union, which organized the Paris trip, says Sodexo has used "harsh," though legal, measures to dissuade U.S. workers from organizing, such as requiring them to attend anti-union presentations. Multinationals are "engaging in behavior around the world that wouldn't be acceptable in their home country," says Mitch Ackerman of the Washington-based SEIU. "We want to hold them accountable," he says.

**THE EMBARRASSMENT FACTOR**

Sodexo isn't the only Old World company under attack. Deutsche Telekom, the German owner of cell-phone operator T-Mobile, has been targeted by the Communications Workers of America and German union Ver.di. The two unions have an agreement that would let Ver.di, which represents most of Deutsche Telekom's German employees, sit at the bargaining table with the CWA if it succeeds in organizing T-Mobile's U.S. workers. In Britain, retail giant Tesco faces pressure from British unions and the Washington-based United Food & Commercial Workers, which is trying to organize at Tesco's Fresh & Easy markets in California, Nevada, and Arizona. The UFCW and unions in Europe have secured a deal with Swedish retailer H&M that paved the way for a UFCW contract covering 1,200 H&M employees in Manhattan.

U.S. labor leaders hope to capitalize on the clout and privileged legal status of European unions. In Germany, major unions such as Ver.di get seats on corporate boards, while France's constitution guarantees the right to strike. The Americans also hope to embarrass companies. The SEIU, for instance, points out that most U.S. employees of Sodexo earn less than France's minimum wage of \$12.28 an hour. "We've always had relationships with [overseas] unions, but now we're moving from relationships into campaign mode," says Michael Bride, the UFCW's deputy organizing director for global strategies.

European companies defend their treatment of American employees. "We respect the rights of workers and the right to unionize," Sodexo CEO Michel Landel told shareholders at the annual meeting. Tesco says its 3,000 U.S. employees receive competitive wages and benefits and are free to unionize but have shown little interest in doing so. T-Mobile says the "overwhelming majority" of its 38,000 U.S. workers don't want to join a union.

More campaigns are likely. Just as shoemaker Nike bowed to demands by American activists to improve conditions in its Asian factories, European corporate leaders may back down in the face of bad publicity, says Lowell Turner, a professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial & Labor Relations. Says Turner: "They want to protect their brands."

PHOTO (COLOR): The SEIU on the march outside Sodexo's annual shareholder meeting in Paris

Copyright Bloomberg L.P., Copyright 2010

By Carol Matlack