Consumer Rights: The Battle Continues

by Sidney Margolius

A great deal of activity affecting consumers has taken place in the last three years, sometimes even a confusing amount. But the results in terms of consumer protection have been noticeably smaller.

Undoubtedly the nation's conscience has been aroused by exposures of the many ways moderate-income families are exploited as consumers—from the millions of garnishments levied on workers' paychecks each year to the blatantly-overpriced processed foods and medicines housewives are lured into buying.

But the business backlash has been unusually sharp and surprisingly effective. Business opposition proved successful in diluting the truth-in-packaging law; in blocking truth-in-credit legislation and in watering down efforts to remedy obsolete state credit laws which give high-pressure sellers the actual tools for deceiving and exploiting working families.

The businessmen's campaign has reached a hysterical pitch that would be ludicrous if it had not proved so successful. Take, for example, Woodrow Wirsig, former editor of Printer's Ink and now President of the New York Better Business Bureau. Wirsig, one of the most inflammatory campaigners against consumer legislation, recently warned an advertising trade conference that the pro-consumer efforts are really a conspiracy against business, calling these efforts:

"A deep, radical and dangerous trend toward the separation of business from every other value in life. . . . If legislation proceeds as it is going, we will inevitably have A CONTROLLED ECONOMY WITH A CONTROLLED SOCIETY." (Emphasis his.)

More restrained in their language, but perhaps even more influential in their opposition to the efforts on behalf of consumers, have been the officials of several large food and soap corporations. The most notable have been W. B. Murphy, President of the Campbell Soup Co. and until recently chairman of the Business Advisory Council, and Neil McElroy, a former Eisenhower cabinet member and now head of Procter and Gamble.

President Johnson has continued to support proposed legislation despite the business backlash and has continued the post of Consumer Assistant at the White House level. But the business opposition has been so stubborn that it has become difficult to win any significant legislation except when actual safety is involved. Thus, except for the partial truth-in-packaging law, the only recent major consumer legislation enacted at the federal level have been the laws concerned with car safety, with protection against hazardous toys and with safety in other children's articles.

There has been, however, a number of advances in consumer organization and protection.

- One is the unusual number of consumer associations organized in the past two years and the noticeably greater consciousness of many citizens that they are consumers as well as wage-earners and need to defend themselves on both flanks. There are now some 16 state consumer associations and almost as many city-wide groups. Labor unions and individual labor officials have been noticeably active in helping to organize these associations, along with representatives of credit unions; consumer co-ops; church groups; the leading Negro organizations; women's groups such as the American Association of University Women and Catholic, Jewish and Negro women's councils; state and local attorneys general; university economists and other community and political leaders and groups.

Similarly, a number of the local "Housewives for Lower Prices" and other boycott groups that spontaneously picketed supermarkets during the food-price upsurge last fall have continued in existence.

The national Consumer Assembly held in Washington last year already has been followed by a similar assembly in New York City, with others expected to follow in other localities. The national Assembly, sponsored by 32 organizations, including the AFL-CIO, and representing a total membership of 50

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