

Rally in Capital Protests a Rise In Smoking Tax Tobacco Plants Close So Workers Can March

By MICHAEL WINES
Special to the New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 9 — (Grant)

his sounds peculiar, but to protest
President Clinton's plans for financing
his proposed overhaul of the health-

care system, some of the nation's big-
gest tobacco companies virtually
stopped making cigarettes today.

Instead, they shuttered their fac-
tories and urged their employees —

and tobacco farmers, seed processors,
cigarette-carton makers and a throng
of other industry workers — to Wash-

ington and the biggest pro-cigarette
rally in political annals.

From 16,000 to 20,000 demonstrators
gathered on the frigid, sodden Hillside

to denounce Mr. Clinton's proposal to
increase his health care plan with a 70-

cent increase in the Federal excise tax
on cigarettes, to 89 cents from 24 cents

per pack.
Later, they marched past the White

House. And later still, they stormed
Congress, diving up an 800-odd-sign-

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Smokers and tobacco industry workers, protesting President Clinton's proposal to quadruple the Federal cigarette tax to pay for his health care program, juffed and puffed outside the White House yesterday.

Smoking deaths and illnesses cost
the economy about \$65 billion a year in
lost workdays and medical expenses,
the Government estimates.
"You kill tobacco, you kill the whole
Last Coast," Leon Harris, 51, a worker
at a Greenville, N.C., company that
cleans and chops up tobacco leaves for
cigarette makers, said as he headed
under a thick jacket at the rally today.
The industry's many critics agree that
it is cigarettes that do the killing. By
the surgeon general's latest estimate,
19,000 people died in 1990 from cancer,
heart disease and respiratory ailments
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Maura Ellis, a spokeswoman for the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, said the notion of a protest first arose last May, when about 1,500 Reynolds workers drove to the capital to protest what was then being billed as a \$2-a-pack tax increase. That June, she said, they formed the Tobacco Action Coalition, now a group of about 2,000 tobacco workers and smokers who, she said, organized today's rally.

With some help, of course: Lorillard's Greensboro factory and Philip Morris's Richmond plant, which by itself makes 500 million cigarettes a day, were all but idle today. Fully 7,000 of Richmond's 9,000 Philip Morris workers boarded buses before sunrise to attend the rally.

At the big and mostly deserted Reynolds plant in Winston-Salem, N.C., it was a day for cleaning and routine maintenance, Ms. Ellis said.

But smoking opponents are not getting the backhanded victory of a dip in the nation's cigarette supply. A Philip Morris official said production would be increased on other days to make up the shortfall. "Our manufacturing planning team made the necessary adjustments to see that before or after, we could continue to meet our customers' demand," said Jay S. Poole, the company's director of government and community relations.

Attendance at the rally was voluntary for most, if not all the workers, but many, including Philip Morris employees, were paid a day's wages for their appearance and bused to the capital at company expense.

Whether it all will make any difference in Congress is not clear. Political sentiment has drifted steadily and quickly against smoking in recent years, even in some tobacco-growing states. Maryland officials announced on Tuesday that the state had labeled smoking an occupational hazard and planned to ban cigarettes entirely from all workplaces in 60 days.

A Beleaguered Industry

The industry has been battered this winter by a barrage of Federal attacks on smoking, including suggestions by the Food and Drug Administration that it will seek to regulate cigarettes for the first time as an addictive drug.

One Republican legislator and a former tobacco grower, Senator Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina, predicted in an interview today that any health plan approved by the Congress would contain a far smaller smokers' tax, if any at all. And it is true that tobacco-state lawmakers, many with years of seniority, hold enormous political power in Congress.

But Mr. Clinton's proposal so far seems to have the support of the two lawmakers who count: Representative Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, who heads the Senate Finance Committee. Their panels are drafting the health-care legislation that will eventually come to votes on the House and Senate floors.

Indeed, the industry's battle in the Finance Committee, if anything, is even tougher after the rally. Among those trapped in traffic jams when the cigarette marchers shut down Pennsylvania Avenue today was Mr. Moynihan, who was late to an appointment at the White House.