Nestlé's puts crunch on developing world

By Kenneth Burke
In the past few years, the Nestlé Co., Abbott, Bristol-Meyers, and other large multinational companies that produce infant formulas have begun to market these products to mothers in Third World nations. In radio advertisements and on billboards they promote the use of artificial formulas as the modern way to feed babies. They arrange for nurses to distribute free samples in clinics and hospitals, give the impression that medical authority encourages bottle feeding.

This campaign has succeeded: many mothers who would otherwise have breast-fed their infants have chosen to bottle-feed instead. One result has been that the use of these modern, up-to-date techniques has helped to increase the number of infant deaths from infection and malnutrition in the developing nations. One specialist in pediatric nutrition, Dr. Derrick B. Hilllis, has estimated that Nestlé, formula companies' promotion of bottle feeding as a replacement for nursing has caused 10 million cases of severe infant malnutrition and infection each year.

It may seem strange to Americans to think that the familiar baby bottle could have such catastrophic effects. After all, it has worked well here and in other advanced nations for many years. Why shouldn't it work just as well in a poor country? There are several reasons.

First, artificial formulas are inherently inferior to breast milk. Breast milk contains antibodies to several disease-causing organisms. The passive immunity conferred by these antibodies is an important protection for an infant, especially in a developing country where often sanitation is poor and water supplies contaminated. Although commercial formulas provide the nutrients that a baby needs, they have none of the antibodies present in breast milk and do not give any direct protection against infections.

Another important problem with bottle feeding in poor areas is the fact that the formula is expensive and families so poor that they are often forced to dilute the formula to stretch it until they can afford to buy more. Since a mother who bottle-feeds even just part of the time gradually stops producing milk, the baby often ends up not getting enough food. A malnourished infant does not grow properly. Malnutrition retards a child's physical and mental growth, irreversibly in severe cases.

The use of formulas can also make a child more susceptible to infectious diseases. Instead of receiving sterile breast milk, the baby drinks formula that has been prepared by mixing a concentrate with water that may be contaminated by microorganisms. Many families can afford neither the equipment nor the fuel necessary to properly sterilize formula and bottles, nor can poor families afford refrigerators in which to store opened cans. Once the formula becomes contaminated, bacteria multiply rapidly in it. Even families who do have the resources to properly handle formulas will not know how to do it if illiteracy prevents them from reading the directions. Often the directions are printed in a foreign language.

Malnutrition and infection in infants are the two halves of a vicious circle. Malnutrition weakens a child's resistance to disease. Infection increases a baby's nutritional needs and interferes with the absorption of the nutrients that (s)he does get, decreasing the malnutrition. A child can be trapped in this cycle, getting sicker and sicker until (s)he dies. Bottle feeding in places where poverty is widespread and sanitation is inadequate exacer-

bates both halves of the cycle, poverty causing babies not to get enough food, contamination and lack of refrigeration making them sick.

In spite of the harm they are causing children, the formula companies continue to promote their products in Third World nations. It is possible to challenge the practices of the American formula manufacturers through stockholder resolutions, but the Swiss-based Nestle company, the world's largest producer of formula, is not susceptible to such tactics because its stock is unavailable to American investors. Nestle does, however, sell millions of dollars worth of consumer products here. The United States is Nestle's largest market outside of Europe. The Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFAC) is therefore organizing a nation-wide boycott of Nestle products, in order to put pressure on Nestle to stop promoting bottle-feeding in developing nations. Before we are willing to call off the boycott, we demand that Nestle (1) stop direct advertising of infant formula to consumers in developing nations, (2) stop distributing free samples to hospitals and new mothers, (3) stop using milk nurses to encourage bottle-feeding, (4) stop promoting infant formula to the health professions and institutions. We ask members of the MIT community to support the boycott by refusing to buy these products made by Nestle and its subsidiaries:

Nestle Crunch, Quik, and Toll House Morsels.
Nestama, Nesten, Dedos, Taster's Choice, Scoprilme, Sunrise Libby's canned goods.
Smaller products and restaurants Crosse and Blackwell.
Deep Park Mountain Spring Water.
Wendys.
Jarlsburg Cheese.
Swiss Knight Cheese.
Kashi Crispbread.
Maggi Kelfer.

So far, Nestle has shown little sensitivity to the sickness and malnutrition its promotion of infant formulas has helped to cause. It now appears that the economic pressure of a boycott is the only way to stop Nestle from continuing to encourage unsound feeding practices.