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Student Group Steps Up Effort to Get Universities to Use Their Clout Against Sweatshop Factories

[By AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE](#)

A national network of student labor activists demanded on Wednesday that universities require the makers of apparel bearing their college logos to produce the goods at factories where workers are paid a "living wage" and have been allowed to form unions and bargain collectively.

United Students Against Sweatshops announced the campaign to end the sweatshop production of collegiate apparel during demonstrations at 40 colleges, including Duke University, Indiana University at Bloomington, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of California at Berkeley. The campaign is a bid to breathe new life into the student group's seven-year struggle to protect the rights of workers in the global garment industry.

"We know that we'll face resistance, but we firmly believe that the rights of people must take precedence over the drive for university licensing fees and corporate profits," said Jessica Rutter, a national organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops.

It has been difficult to sustain the improved working conditions that have come about in some overseas apparel factories because major brands, such as Adidas, Nike, and Reebok, tend to shift orders away from "good factories," a step that forces them to close, the student group said.

Paying workers a living wage and allowing them to unionize forces the factories to seek higher prices for their products from the apparel companies, which then turn to lower-cost producers, the group said.

In response to that pattern, the group -- with the help of the Worker Rights Consortium, an independent monitoring organization that has 144 colleges and universities as members -- created a plan that it says will help ensure that collegiate apparel comes from factories where workers are treated fairly.

The proposal urges universities to require that apparel bearing their logos comes from a "sweat-free" factory, as designated by the Worker Rights Consortium. Apparel companies would pay a little more than the industry norm for the goods that they buy from those factories so that the factories could then pay their employees a living wage, according to the plan.

Sweatshop conditions, the student group said, would begin to disappear if a set group of factories received fair prices for their work and a steady stream of college-logo business in return for respecting workers' rights.

"It's a bold proposal, but at the same time, it has a logic that I think is very compelling," said Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium.

Mr. Nova said universities have "shown themselves willing to make changes in the way that their goods are produced."

"I think there's real potential for them to embrace this approach," he said.

Jim Wilkerson, director of trademark licensing and stores operations at Duke University, said the proposal is "feasible and doable." While senior officials at the institution have not seen the proposal yet, "support is likely," he said. Duke first adopted a code of conduct for its licensees in 1998 ([The Chronicle](#), November 13, 1998).

"I think it's certainly time, based on our experience, to attempt a better way of ensuring good working conditions in factories that produce our goods," Mr. Wilkerson said. "We're hopeful if this works that it would serve as an example for factories outside of the college apparel business."