

Anti-Sweatshop Group Finds Abuses at Korean Factory That Produced College Apparel

By MARTIN VAN DER WERF

The Worker Rights Consortium, a nascent anti-sweatshop group, said Thursday that there is "substantial evidence of severe ongoing violations" of labor standards at a factory in Mexico that has produced licensed apparel for at least 11 American colleges and universities.

The report is the first from the organization, formed last year amid student protests to monitor the conditions under which apparel with collegiate names or logos is made. The factory, which was hit by a general strike January 9, is a contractor for Nike and Reebok, although apparently only Nike makes collegiate apparel at the facility. It is owned by Kukdong International, a South Korean company.

"What we were able to verify right away, based on the clearest evidence, is that unless our universities intervene promptly ... (workers) will suffer deeply for speaking out about serious labor abuses," said Mark Barenberg, a law professor at Columbia University and chairman of the consortium's board.

The factory has produced licensed apparel for Boston College, Georgetown University, Purdue University, the University of Arizona, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Connecticut, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Indiana at Bloomington, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Oregon.

A Nike Web site indicates that the factory may produce apparel for as many as five other universities, but the consortium could not confirm that.

A Nike official immediately criticized the report,

and said it points up the shortcomings of the consortium's monitoring approach, which is based on responding to worker complaints.

"It's just parachuting into a country, conducting a few interviews, and writing a report in a few days," said Vada O. Manager, director of global issues management for Nike. "Thorough monitoring involves culling through records, matching up pay stubs, getting a sense of the local practices and culture. There is a lot more involved in auditing and monitoring than what that report represents."

No comment was available from Kukdong International.

The consortium's report says the factory employs children aged 13 to 15 for up to 10 hours a day. Mexican law allows for children under age 16 to work up to six hours daily.

The report said factory managers admitted that there had been physical abuse of workers, including one who was hit with a hammer and one with a screwdriver. In addition, the report says, workers have been denied maternity leave, are paid less than the minimum wage, and have been sickened by eating rancid meat served in the company cafeteria.

According to the report, Kukdong fired five supervisory workers in early January who were leaders of a movement to oust the existing union and replace it with a more activist labor organization. About 800 of the factory's 850 or so workers reportedly went on strike to support those workers. Mexican police broke up the strike on January 11. Two days later, the factory's owners announced that they would rehire the workers. However, the report says, some were turned away when they showed up for work.

Mr. Manager said Nike has pressured the factory owners to reinstate the workers and correct other deficiencies, but he challenged the Worker Rights Consortium report. "I think there are true questions about its objectivity and the veracity of the claims," he said.

For example, he said, there had been earlier findings, in "one or two instances," that the factory was employing workers under the age of 16. Factory managers admitted it was a mistake

and assured Nike it was no longer happening.

Scott J. Nova, executive director of the consortium, said there would be a more complete report about the visit to the factory in about two weeks. He admitted that the research for the report was limited, although a seven-member delegation conducted more than 40 interviews in three days.

"Our report is a response to an immediate crisis," he said. "We went in and tried, first of all, to verify whether any of the allegations were true." However, Mr. Nova said the consortium was likely to alter its approach and begin doing more general assessments of factories rather than just responding to crises. "That is part of the evolution of the organization," said Mr. Nova, who became the group's first executive director in December.

That would bring the consortium's monitoring methods closer to those of the Fair Labor Association, which includes Nike and about 140 colleges and universities among its members. The Worker Rights Consortium has more than 60 institutions in its membership, but no apparel companies.

Nike does not now have any orders for collegiate apparel at the Kukdong factory. In the past, Nike has said it plans to have more licensed apparel produced at the factory in the future, but Mr. Manager said Thursday that he was unsure if Nike would return. "That's an open question right now," he said.

The University of Connecticut released a statement Thursday afternoon, urging the two anti-sweatshop groups to work together on a monitoring plan for the factory, along with Nike, Reebok, and the International Labor Rights Fund.

"The university agrees that Nike, Reebok, and other companies should continue their relationship with Kukdong," the statement said. "Terminating these relationships will not help Kukdong's workers and will remove a key point of leverage in protecting individual rights."

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

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