

Anti-Sweatshop Group Criticizes Labor Practices at N.Y. Factory

By [AUDREY Y. WILLIAMS](#)

A year-old anti-sweatshop group formed by 82 colleges has criticized the injury rate at a New York company that makes baseball caps for many of the group's members. The accusation by the Worker Rights Consortium marks the first time the group has condemned the domestic labor practices of a company in the United States.

The group's investigation of worker complaints at the New Era Cap Company's plant in Derby, N.Y., was detailed in a preliminary report released by the Worker Rights Consortium on Tuesday. The report also charges that the New Era workers, who are on strike, are being punished for voting four years ago to join the Communication Workers of America.

The report says the company's July decision to cut workers' wages and the shift of some production to New Era's nonunion factories in the South are retaliatory moves. The consortium's representatives spent four days at the New Era plant interviewing 30 workers and gathering documents.

"There is a lot of collegiate apparel produced in the U.S., and factories in the U.S. have no less of an obligation to respect their workers than factories overseas," said Scott J. Nova, executive director of the consortium, whose first investigative report seven months ago focused on labor violations at a Mexican plant that makes collegiate apparel for Nike. "We feel there is a real danger of irreparable harm to workers if some action isn't taken now."

Officials at the family-owned New Era, maker of 15 million caps a year, declined to answer questions from the anti-sweatshop group as it collected data for its report. Officials of the 81-year-old company said Monday that the Worker Rights Consortium's findings have no validity.

"When you see people who are part of the WRC on the picket lines with workers, how fair are they going to be?" said John DeWaal, marketing director at New Era, the exclusive manufacturer of baseball caps worn by Major League players.

The 300 workers at the Derby plant went on strike about six weeks ago, following a move by New Era to cut wages for workers who don't do their jobs faster.

Part of the consortium's report highlights the injuries it says workers have sustained from doing the same motion repeatedly while making baseball caps. Forty-six percent of the 140 New Era workers surveyed have been diagnosed by a doctor with work-related musculoskeletal disorders, it says, while 21 percent have had surgery to correct the problem or need to do so.

Mr. DeWaal said that the cap-maker has hired an independent company to examine ergonomics issues at

New Era and that the number of reported injuries has fallen. Shifting production to the South, Mr. DeWaal said, is New Era's way of competing with companies that produce similar goods at low-wage companies overseas.

"Here we are trying to fight to keep jobs in America," he said. "To do that, we have to be competitive."

The consortium's members have copies of the report, and "it's certainly our hope that universities and colleges act as they see fit on the basis of the information that we have provided," Mr. Nova said. "Our role is to be an agent of the university and keep them informed."

One interested consortium member is the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which counts New Era as one of its top 40 licensees. The university, like its fellow members in the consortium, has adopted a code of conduct for companies licensed to make products bearing the institution's name and logo.

Rutledge Tufts Jr., director of trademarks and licensing at Chapel Hill, said the university would like to hear New Era's response to the report's claims. Chapel Hill could turn to a committee it formed to advise it on how to respond to such charges, or gather information about the company on its own, Mr. Tufts said.

The consortium's member colleges aren't planning to sever their licensing agreements with New Era right now, Mr. Nova said. Such a move typically "is a last resort," he said.

The group's report concludes by asking New Era to stop shifting work previously done in Derby to its other plants, and to offer proof that the Derby workers' allegations are false.

Mr. Nova said the Worker Rights Consortium is still gathering evidence, but could release a final report on New Era as early as two months from now.

Meanwhile, Mr. DeWaal said that New Era had notified another anti-sweatshop group -- one that has apparel companies as well as colleges in its ranks -- that it plans to apply for membership. Companies affiliated with the other group, the Fair Labor Association, agree to open their factories to inspections by independent, external auditors. The Worker Rights Consortium, by contrast, selects the representatives who conduct its investigations.

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