

Duke to become member of WRC

By Dave Ingram

Signaling a different approach to monitoring factories that manufacture Duke-licensed products, the University announced Wednesday that it intends to join the Worker Rights Consortium, a non-profit group of colleges, universities and labor activists that inspects companies' labor practices. In addition, the University has decided to let its contract expire with New Era Cap Company, which owns a factory in Derby, N.Y., that is currently entangled in a labor dispute.

The University had previously hesitated to enter the WRC because Duke was already affiliated with the Fair Labor Association, an anti-sweatshop organization that it originally helped found in 1999. Labor activists have called for more support of the WRC and criticized the FLA because of the role corporations play in the organization. Now, however, administrators believe that the groups can work together.

"When it all started there was a feeling that the FLA was competitive with the WRC. Over the years they have become more complimentary," said Tallman Trask, executive vice president. "After a lot of conversations, it seemed there was no longer a reason not to be member of the WRC."

After students' January 1999 sit-in of the Allen Building, Duke received national attention as a leader in scrutinizing factories for university apparel made with sweatshop labor. Many of the other schools then at the forefront of the sweatshop movement, like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, have already joined the 80-member WRC while Duke has tried to work within the 160-school FLA.

As a member of the WRC, the University would pay the organization dues of 1 percent of annual licensing revenue, the same amount it pays to the FLA. In return, the WRC would help the University monitor factories involved in producing Duke-licensed goods, including the New Era factory.

Trask said that New Era has been unresponsive in answering accusations that it has treated workers unfairly. Workers at the plant are currently on strike, and the National Labor Relations Board is mediating the dispute. The University will not renew the contract with the company until there is more investigation of factory conditions by an independent group, Trask said.

Campus labor activists responded positively to both announcements.



THAD PARSONS/THE CHRONICLE

DUKE APPAREL HAS IN the past been the cause for protest among anti-sweatshop advocates.

"Right now there is a place for both [the FLA and WRC] because of our past involvement in the FLA, but hopefully that will change and we will support the WRC more," said freshman Allison Brim, a member of Duke Students Against Sweatshops. "It is the only organization that is doing this job in an effective way."

Brim praised the WRC's work inspecting the New Era factory and its general practices in monitoring and reporting on working conditions. She said the leadership of companies in the FLA and their involvement in monitoring systems detract from its effectiveness. Earlier this fall, the FLA amended its bylaws to include two more university representatives on its board of directors.

Trask expressed hope that the FLA and WRC combined will improve monitoring of factories that produce University goods, but he noted that the groups have different agendas. While the FLA attempts to work with companies to inspect working conditions of only certain factories, the WRC takes a more active role, one in which WRC officials said the University can play a part in.

"Duke has been a very important leader in code of conduct issues from the beginning of the process, and their involvement will strengthen the WRC at every level," said Scott Nova, executive director of the WRC. "They will have the opportunity to be part of an organization that will help achieve their goal--producing goods with fair labor practices that will bear the Duke name."