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Washington Final
Washington and Baltimore: Clouds will increase, high near 80. Tonight, showers arrive, low near 60. Tomorrow, showers likely, high near 70. Weather map appears on Page C14.

Latin Sweatshops Pressed by U.S. Campus Power

Dominican Plant Signs Labor Pact

By DAVID GONZALEZ

VILLA ALTAGRACIA, Dominican Republic, March 31 — When workers first tried unionizing the BJ&B hat factory that is the town's biggest employer, the streets were abuzz with rumors that the factory would rather close down than negotiate.

Two years later, not only is the factory still around, but there also is a union, and it recently negotiated a labor contract that provides raises, scholarships and other benefits that are unheard of among the country's 500 foreign-owned plants.

The pact, signed last week, was the latest victory for a once unlikely coalition of United States college students, labor activists and world-class brands like Nike and Reebok working to improve labor conditions in the factories in developing countries that make caps and clothing emblazoned with university names and mascots.

The BJ&B factory, which employs about 1,600 people, was the focus of the first campaigns on American campuses against sweatshop labor that grew out of the protests against globalization in the 1990's. Labor leaders here and abroad now say it is probably the largest factory among the free-trade zones of the Caribbean, Central America or Mexico to have been unionized.

The zones were set up in recent decades with tax breaks and other incentives to create jobs by attracting international manufacturers. But only a handful here, or elsewhere, have unions at all. The union at BJ&B was the first formed in a free zone in five years.

The success follows a similar victory for labor leaders in Mexico. The organizers here hope that it may provide incentive to other factories, though most workers will lack the leverage that came from the coalition of students, universities and big American brands.

BJ&B itself has made caps for major companies like Nike and Reebok and for athletic powerhouse schools like Penn State and the University of North Carolina.

"I never thought a group of students, thousands of them, could put so much pressure on these brands," said Ignacio Hernández, the general secretary of the Federation of Free Trade Zone Unions. "We were determined to win, but without them it would have taken us five more years. And it would have been more traumatic without them because all we would have had was the pressure to strike."

Still, the process was not easy — the factory had to be pressured several times into rehiring union members who were dismissed on the flimsiest of pretexts. At one point, the American brands brought in outsiders who spoke about the rights of workers to choose a union or not. Yet it was accomplished without the kinds of violent clashes or shutdowns that have marked organizing efforts elsewhere.

The BJ&B factory that opened here in 1987 sits in the shadow of a dilapidated and long-abandoned sugar mill that once sustained the local economy. Down the road sits another empty hulk that was once a government-owned paper factory, now abandoned, in this rural town about an hour north of Santo Domingo, the capital.

Amid such reminders of tough



Fredy de los Santos, a labor leader, speaking on Wednesday at an assembly of workers in Villa Altagracia.

times, the BJ&B factory is the best hope for many people here to land a job. It occupies most of the buildings in the Free Trade Zone, which it shares with a smaller dress factory.

Workers said they had tried to form a union about six years ago because managers were forcing them to work overtime, sometimes dismissing them without reason when they tried to leave early to attend night school. Other said that supervisors would often insult workers or threaten to hit them.

"Even if you missed work with an excuse, they would not pay you," said Jenny Pérez, who used to work at the factory. "They would treat you in ways they should not. They would humiliate you verbally, but you took it because there was no other place to work."

When a group of 20 workers declared to the company they were organizing a union in the fall of 2001, they were soon fired, prompting the first of several interventions from abroad. In time, they were rehired, only to be assigned to collecting trash. More pressure ensued, workers said, after supervisors told them that the union was a bunch of "terrorists" who would lead them to economic ruin.

The stateside groups began to lobby the brands that had contracts with the factory. United Students Against Sweatshops, a group that at one point sent thousands of letters to the factory, also sent a student volunteer for most of last year to help the union organize. University officials, brand executives and officials from a consortium of campuses, unions and students visited with the union and factory managers.

"We were trying to convince the factory managers through ongoing pressure from Nike and Reebok that it was not in their interest to allow this to continue," said Scott Nova, the executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium. "Gradually, the factory came to recognize that, and we eventually persuaded them to produce a public letter signed by managers pledging neutrality, no in-

timidation and that the workers had the right to make their own choice."

Yet even after the union eked out a majority late last year, the factory began layoffs that labor leaders said singled out union members. Factory managers said the dismissals, which were based on productivity, involved mostly workers who had not supported the union.

Rehiring those workers — about 10 of whom remain unemployed — be-

Top brands work, too, to improve conditions for the employees.

came one of the first points of the contract talks, which began earlier this year.

Alberto Yang, the factory administrator, said that while the company had always met or exceeded local labor laws, it agreed to the union's demands. He said that the contract only codified practices that the company had followed, although labor leaders said the company had been inconsistent at best in the past.

"Our company is not hidden, it is famous and all the international brands work with us," he said. "With global companies, you have to accept global standards, not just local ones."

The campus groups said that the large American brands had to be pushed several times to be more aggressive in responding to concerns over the treatment of workers.

Today executives with the American brands said that they were pleased with the outcome, saying the process allowed both the union and the factory to learn how to negotiate.

"This is an excellent example of the limits of individual parties acting alone and the strength of many parties acting synergistically," said

Doug Cahn, vice president for human rights programs at Reebok International Ltd. "There are few other examples like this where difficult issues were resolved."

Within that process, the universities and students were able to bring to the table a certain influence usually absent during such negotiations: the reputation of the school whose name is on the cap or the student who is eagerly courted by the athletic wear companies.

"We are the target market of a lot of these brands and they want a positive image on campus because they want consumers for life," said Molly McGrath, development director at United Students Against Sweatshops. "We also have the moral and ethical argument being on the side of a university, so we can pressure the university to use their leverage in society to change the policies of the brands."

She would like to see the brands act a little faster in the future, she said, to avoid the kinds of repeated firings that marred the BJ&B negotiations. Union leaders said the average wage now for workers was about \$31 a week.

That a pact was reached at all was perhaps the most surprising and gratifying turn of events for Rut Tufts, who manages the licensing program for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which nets some \$4 million annually. He had gone to Villa Altagracia to visit with workers last year.

"I have been in their houses and see how they are trying to hold things together, and this collective bargaining agreement has got to make a difference in their lives," he said. "I hope it's what they need or a step to what they need."

So does Patricia Graterox, a factory worker and single mother who looks forward to the 10 percent raise. She hopes to be able to study nursing with help from the factory's scholarship fund.

"Before, you could not do that," she said. "Now you can. At least, I think I can."