

Labor Rights Group Pressures Nike

A year-old labor rights group has registered its biggest success by getting Nike to pressure managers at a Mexican apparel factory to rehire hundreds of workers after a three-day strike. The group seized upon the dispute to pressure Nike to work to improve the factory's conditions. [B2.]

B2 Y

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SATURDAY, JANUARY 27, 2001

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Rights Group Scores Success With Nike

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

A year-old labor rights group formed by students and universities has registered its biggest success thus far by getting Nike Inc. to press managers at a Mexican apparel factory to rehire hundreds of workers after a three-day strike.

The group, the Worker Rights Consortium, which includes 67 universities as members, seized on the labor dispute at the Kukdong factory in Puebla to highlight sweatshop conditions and to press Nike to work to improve the factory's conditions.

In an unusual move, this new labor rights group sent a delegation to Mexico to investigate the dispute and then issued a report on Thursday saying the factory violated child labor laws, fired strike leaders and intimidated union supporters into not returning to their jobs.

The Worker Rights Consortium, which includes Brown University, Columbia University and the University of Michigan as members, was formed by students and university administrators seeking to ensure satisfactory conditions at factories that make goods bearing the universities' logos.

The factory, about 70 miles southeast of Mexico City, has made sweat-shirts bearing the names of many universities, including Georgetown University, Purdue University and the University of Connecticut. Nike and Reebok have used the factory

since it opened 14 months ago.

Nike officials said yesterday that they had worked since Jan. 9, the day the strike began, to resolve the dispute and improve conditions. In a statement, the company said, "Nike shares the concern of all interested parties that this situation be resolved fairly and expeditiously and that all Kukdong workers be treated with dignity and respect."

In its report, the Worker Rights

A consortium says a Mexico plant fired strike leaders.

Consortium found that the factory violated Mexican laws by employing children under the age of 16 for more than six hours a day. The report said the factory's cafeteria served rancid food that made some workers sick.

The report also accused the factory of violating the workers' freedom of association by firing five strike leaders and by not rehiring many workers who went on strike. The consortium estimates that about 250 of the 850 employees at the time the strike began have been rehired. Nike officials estimate that 475 workers are now at the factory.

The Worker Rights Consortium urged its university members to

press Nike and Reebok to persuade Kukdong to rehire all the workers as soon as possible.

"The immediate issue is getting these people back to work," said Scott Nova, the consortium's executive director. "If something is not done of an aggressive nature to solve the problems of these workers, the prospect of them ever returning will rapidly diminish."

In its statement, Nike appeared to agree with the consortium, saying it supports the rights of all Kukdong workers to return to the factory. Vada Manager, a Nike spokesman, said that a Nike official was in Puebla yesterday working with Kukdong's managers.

Mr. Manager said, "They understand in the strongest possible terms that Nike's position is that the existing union and management need to work together to ensure free passage back to the factory for workers without retribution."

Reebok officials also said they were working to ensure that the workers' freedom of association was protected.

Nike said the consortium's report was not objective and the company called for sending a independent monitor to examine the factory.

But Mr. Nova criticized that idea. "What's needed now," he said, "is not further investigation, but action. What Nike is proposing may be worth discussing down the road, but it doesn't address the immediate problems."