
SUNY, CUNY could double national anti-sweatshop effort

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ALBANY, N.Y. -- In public campus stores statewide, sweat shirts with school logos can go for \$36, a polo shirt costs \$31, and a trendy hooded pullover sweat shirt rarely used for sweating fetches \$48 or more.

Back in places like Puebla, Mexico, where the fashionable Nike and Reebok college sweat shirts have long been made, the worker pulled down about 65 cents an hour. Workers also complained of verbal abuse and said several employees were fired after a cafeteria boycott over the quality of the food.

Those conditions are slowly changing in a large part due to the efforts of the Worker Rights Consortium, a nonprofit organization that enlisted 94 colleges and universities in its fight against sweatshops.

The effort is in line for a major boost. The state Legislature is poised to change state law to allow the State University of New York's 64 campuses and the City University of New York's 20 campuses to refuse to deal with sweatshop products.

Under the legislation, SUNY and CUNY campuses would be allowed to declare that a firm that uses sweatshops to make products is unqualified to do business with the college, even if that company submitted the lowest price in a competitive bidding process.

"The strength of the organization depends on the participation of colleges and universities," said Scott Nova of the Washington, D.C.-based Rights Consortium. "If the State University or City University systems as a whole joined, that would obviously greatly increase our strength, as would individual schools if they joined."

State lawmakers say there's strong support for the bill.

"It will give a tool where a community can publicly react and bring economic might to say, 'You aren't a qualified provider because you have a shoddy record,'" said Assemblyman John McEneny, an Albany Democrat. "Otherwise, we're subsidizing sweatshops _ the worst possible scenario."

In Puebla, the Worker Rights Consortium prompted changes in the plant and in making the union more responsive.

"Workers now have a direct and effective negotiator, their union, which is enabling them to improve working conditions _ in terms of dangerous areas of the plant, ventilation, lighting, breaks, cafeteria food, treatment of workers by supervisors and in other ways," said Huberto Juarez Nunez, a professor of Economics at the Autonomous University of Puebla in Mexico. He mediated the worker dispute.

"Workers now have a clause in their contract that links salaries to the earnings of the company," Nunez said. "Never before in Mexico, in any manufacturing industry, has there been such a clause."

The breakthrough shows how pervasive the problem is in college apparel, much of which is made at least in part in Mexico or Asia.

"It's very difficult not to buy a sweatshop item," said Tina Post of NYPIRG. "It's endemic."

She and McEneny said experience so far has shown little if any added price when manufacturers avoid sweatshops or improve conditions.

"There would be a higher economic cost in a student boycott," McEneny said, noting the growing support of the movement on campuses.

Ithaca College has avoided sweatshop manufacturers since 1998, when the college required vendors to sign a "code of conduct." A comparison of apparel in its campus store shows the same prices as those at SUNY schools that have not yet taken that stand. Ithaca joined the Worker Rights Consortium in February.

"Ithaca College has long promoted the notion of `social screening' in cases where our business activities could be seen to have a direct relationship with abuses of human rights," said college President Peggy Williams.

The bill mirrors a similar measure for public elementary and secondary schools that was sponsored by McEneny and approved a year ago. The college bill has strong sponsors: Assembly Labor Committee Chairwoman Catherine Nolan, D-Queens, in the Assembly and Senate Labor Committee Chairman Guy Velella, R-Bronx, in the Senate.

Gov. George Pataki is an opponent of sweatshop labor and would "certainly look forward" to reviewing the bill if the Legislature sends it to him, Pataki spokesman Joseph Conway said.

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On the Net: <http://www.workersrights.org>