

WORKER RIGHTS CONSORTIUM

Labor group hails efforts to improve conditions at New Era Cap

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A labor monitoring group supported by colleges and universities has issued a positive report about working conditions at New Era Cap Co.'s Derby plant, after criticizing the company in a preliminary report last year.

The Washington, D.C.-based Worker Rights Consortium said New Era had resolved many of the concerns raised in the August 2001 report. It also said the capmaker had committed to addressing remaining issues related to ergonomics.

Overall, the report described New Era's efforts as "extensive and genuine."

Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, credited colleges and universities with helping persuade New Era to work with the consortium.

"I think it became clear to the company that their college and university partners wanted them to address substantive concerns about working conditions and cooperate with the monitoring process."

Timothy Freer, New Era's director of human resources, said the positive report will help strengthen its relationship with colleges and universities, which account for a large part of its business.

"I think it's a very favorable report," Freer said. "We spent quite a bit of time with the Worker Rights Consortium over the past few months."

Freer noted that last month, the Fair Labor Association, also based in Washington, D.C., had accepted New Era's application for membership, giving the company's practices another significant stamp of approval.

After the Worker Rights Consortium had issued its preliminary report last year, several colleges and universities that recognize the group as a labor standards monitor had dropped their contracts with New Era or allowed their deals to expire.

Freer said New Era has regained some of that business from colleges and is working to restore its contracts with others.

The Worker Rights Consortium described last year's report on New Era as "preliminary" because company officials did not participate in it. The organization wanted input from the company before reaching definitive conclusions, Nova said.

That cooperation came last March, when New Era officials agreed to provide documents, and allowed access to the plant, workers and management officials.

When members of CWA Local 14177 voted last summer to end an 11-month strike at the Derby plant, CWA officials withdrew their complaint to the consortium and requested the investigation be dropped.

But Nova said the consortium was obligated to finish the investigation once it was under way. Last month, the assessment team made a follow-up visit to the Derby plant, after the site had staffed up its production department following the end of the walkout.

A CWA official could not be reached to comment.

Nova said the labor agreement contributed to the positive review given by the Worker Rights Consortium, in two ways. New Era's willingness to negotiate a deal was a sign of its good-faith efforts, he said, and the contract's contents dealt with a number of the issues raised in the preliminary report.

The Worker Rights Consortium stood by the findings of its preliminary report, but said there had been "very substantial positive changes" at the Derby plant since then, in both freedom of association, and health and safety issues.

The investigation began after seven workers in May 2001 alleged "serious violations" of the Worker Rights Consortium and university codes of conduct.

The preliminary report included evidence that union workers or activists had been threatened or intimidated, and that the company had failed to bargain in good faith with the union.

In its follow-up report, the Worker Rights Consortium said it could not reach a firm conclusion on one of the workers' central claims: that New Era moved some production and equipment from Derby to a nonunion plant in Alabama, in retaliation for the Derby workers' vote to affiliate with CWA.

The company contends it made those moves based on Derby's relative unproductivity and high rates of absenteeism.

In its follow-up report, the consortium said relations between the company and union have improved, and that a "spirit of cooperation and mutual respect" to resolve problems now exists at the Derby plant.

Freer echoed that view, saying the company regularly meets with union members to discuss concerns. "The atmosphere has been very good," he said.

The report also had largely positive things to say about the Derby plant's recent record on health and safety issues.

For instance, workers are now playing a more active role in health and safety issues, as called for in the labor contract, and management is showing

responsiveness to worker concerns.

The Worker Rights Consortium called for New Era to conduct a comprehensive, department-by-department assessment of ergonomic hazards. And during the follow-up investigation, some workers complained that new piece rates put into effect at the plant were increasing their risk of injuries.

The company has agreed to have a professional ergonomist conduct the comprehensive study the consortium called for. The company said it will determine whether it needs to make any changes in equipment, rates or other areas, and share its findings with the Worker Rights Consortium.

The organization said the company has taken steps to improve its record keeping for work place injuries, as well as prevention and tracking of needle punctures.