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Harvard Will Join Sweatshop Watchdog Group

In letter, Summers pledges to enter Worker Rights Consortium

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In response to a prolonged student campaign, the University announced yesterday it will join a novel independent sweatshop oversight organization to monitor working conditions in factories manufacturing Harvard merchandise.

Harvard Students Against Sweatshops (HSAS) has lobbied the University for five years to join the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a coalition of universities, students and labor experts that acts as a watchdog over factories manufacturing school apparel. Over 100 schools are already members of the WRC.

Harvard administrators had long maintained that Harvard's participation in the Fair Labor Association (FLA), a group with a similar role that includes representatives of the apparel industry, was sufficient.

But HSAS and other labor supporters have assailed the FLA, claiming it is constrained in its oversight ability by its powerful industry contingent. Industry representatives hold six of the fourteen seats on the FLA board.

University President Lawrence H. Summers announced the move in a letter sent last night to HSAS members Gabriel A. Katsh '04 and Emma S. Mackinnon '05.

"Harvard must take responsible steps to ensure that apparel bearing its trademarks is not produced in sweatshop conditions," Summers wrote in the letter. "The University would benefit from more information about and increased monitoring of factories located abroad."

Katsh hailed the decision as a victory for workers rights.

"The University is finally acknowledging its responsibility in ensuring that the factories that make Harvard's apparel are clean and safe places to work," he said.

Mackinnon, who is also a Crimson editor, said that protracted negotiations between HSAS and Harvard led up to this decision.

"It's a huge victory for us, but it's also a point we were getting closer and closer to," Mackinnon said. "It follows the tra-

jectory of the discussions we've been having all along."

But she added that the announcement caught her by surprise.

A call requesting comment from a Summers spokesperson was not immediately returned late last night.

HSAS had not heard back from the administration after a meeting with General Counsel Robert W. Juliano '83 on Nov. 10, and Juliano had declined to set a deadline for a University decision.

Mackinnon said she was never convinced that Summers personally supported WRC membership.

"One of the most surprising things is that Summers himself would do this," she said. "One of the things we thought would be a barrier all along is that Summers' economic beliefs didn't seem to square with the WRC."

Katsh said joining the WRC will offer the University better information about factory conditions and will help ensure workers' fundamental rights.

"The most basic and most important thing that the University can get out of this is that there will be greater transparency about the conditions of the factories," he said. "Harvard can now leverage its power and prestige in ensuring that any problems in the factories where the apparel is made are resolved."

Mackinnon emphasized the significance of Harvard backing the WRC for workers' rights more generally.

"It is really meaningful for the anti-sweatshop movement that Harvard's willing to take a stand like this," she said. "It also kind of suggests a new path for the WRC, and now maybe other schools that were holding out will join."

HSAS's campaign began five years ago as part of a national movement to ensure transparency among school apparel producers.

While Harvard adopted a "code of conduct" for labor standards when it joined the FLA as a founding member, HSAS pushed the University to adopt a more stringent code, which Mackinnon said former University President Neil-L.

Harvard To Join Worker Rights Consortium

WRC, from page 1

Rudenstine indicated he was sympathetic to.

University membership in the WRC was initially included in the list of demands made by the Progressive Student Labor Movement during its 2001 sit-in of Massachusetts Hall, although it was later dropped.

Upon his arrival, Summers backed off of the proposed new code of conduct and seemed skeptical of the WRC proposal, according to Mackinnon.

But HSAS persisted, meeting extensively with the office of General Counsel Anne Taylor during Summers' first year. According to Mackinnon, Taylor told

HSAS members that she coauthored a memo with Senior Director of Federal and State Relations Kevin Casey supporting WRC membership.

Taylor left Mass. Hall at the end of that year and has subsequently declined to comment on the matter.

After her departure, however, the negotiations began from scratch, as Mackinnon said Summers asked HSAS to resubmit the materials associated with its WRC proposal.

HSAS members met with Summers numerous times last year, culminating in an April meeting at which Summers committed to make a decision, according to Mackinnon.

A few weeks later, Summers said he would need more time, and this fall set the matter to Juliano for a recommendation.

Mackinnon said the Juliano meeting seems to have been a turning point in the WRC battle.

"He seemed really open-minded about it at the time," Mackinnon said. "What the University has told us really directly reflects things we said to Juliano and to Summers last spring...which suggests that the conversation was genuine."

While HSAS has not convinced the University to agree to the stricter code it had earlier demanded, Mackinnon

says the group has no plans to pursue the issue.

She said that in their April meeting, Summers conditioned WRC membership on HSAS dropping its demand for a new code.

"The current code is "less than ideal, but it's enough to allow the monitoring organizations to do what they need to do, and maintain a presence in the factories," Mackinnon said.

"Especially because [Harvard is] in these organizations with other universities, it's strong enough to get the job done."

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Please see WRC, page 3