

CAMPUS CRUSADERS BELIEVE THE TIME IS RIPE FOR A BREAKTHROUGH.

# Students Confront Sweatshops

**RICHARD APPELBAUM AND PETER DREIER**

At Columbia University in September, twenty-four students marched to president Lee Bollinger's office, chanted "Hey, hey, Prez Bo, sweatshop labor's got to go," and left a cupcake as a gift. At the University of Michigan activists ran a mock sweatshop, then went to president Mary Sue Coleman's office with a list of demands to end the university's purchase of clothing made in sweatshops. At the University of California, Riverside, students held a sweatshop fashion show to raise awareness of conditions for garment workers.

A new wave of campus activism against sweatshops is sweeping colleges across the country. Students had barely returned to school this fall when more than forty campuses—including Duke, Kansas State, Brown, Loyola, MIT, Macalester, Berkeley and the universities of Indiana, Southern Mississippi and Connecticut—were hit by demonstrations organized by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS).

Universities purchase about \$3 billion in T-shirts, sweatshirts, caps, sneakers and sports uniforms adorned with their institutions' names and logos. The clothing is designed under licensing arrangements by companies like Nike, Reebok, Champion and Russell, which outsource their production to factories around the world. For example, the University of North Carolina earns more than \$2.9 million annually by farming out its logo to more than 500 licensees that produce clothing in factories in Mexico, Central America, Asia and elsewhere.

Since 1998, when Duke students took over the university president's office, some 200 colleges have adopted antisweatshop codes of conduct. They typically require licensees to use factories that pay a living wage, follow adequate labor standards and allow workers to form independent unions.

While some well-publicized gains have been made—including recognition of employee-run unions in some factories, limits on mandatory and unpaid overtime and a decline in sexual harassment of female employees—these codes of conduct have proved difficult to enforce. Major brands make clothing for the college market in thousands of factories around the world, and their college-bound goods are only a small fraction of total production, making it difficult to hold them accountable.

"The codes are just empty promises unless universities back up their commitment with enforceable standards that brands have to live up to," said Zack Knorr, a student leader at the University of California, Riverside.

Moreover, the thirty-year-old apparel quota system, which had set strict limits on the quantity of apparel different coun-


IGOR KOPELNETSKY

tries could export to the United States and Europe, ended January 1. Companies can now roam the world to find the cheapest manufacturing. For most companies that means China, where wages are low and independent unions are illegal.

Student activists are now demanding that universities require licensees to contract exclusively with factories that not only adhere strictly to codes of conduct but also restrict their production to collegiate apparel. They want

workers in this sector to be represented by independent labor unions or employee-owned cooperatives, and to be paid a living wage tied to local prices. Even if higher costs are passed on to consumers, price increases would be trivial. Apparel workers in developing countries typically earn 1 percent to 2 percent of the retail price. If paying a living wage doubled workers' wages, the \$25 sweatshirt with the campus logo would cost only 50 cents or a dollar more.

With the help of the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an independent monitoring organization with 145 member colleges and universities, USAS has identified a number of factories around the world—including in Thailand, South Africa, Kenya, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Indonesia and the United States—that could qualify under these more stringent rules. The campaign calls for phasing in the program: In the first year 25 percent of production must come from the designated factories, and by the third year, 75 percent. If enough universities adopt these standards, the number of sweat-free factories will steadily increase. By creating a collegiate sector of high-quality, worker-friendly factories, USAS expects to prove that there is a market for goods made under ethical conditions.

"USAS is proposing that universities ask their licensees to strike a bargain with a subset of their suppliers—stable orders at fair prices in exchange for a lasting, enforceable commitment to high labor standards," explained Scott Nova, WRC's director. "This approach would make compliance with codes of conduct a winning proposition for factories, which is not the case today."

Campus crusaders, who view their efforts as part of a broader "fair trade" movement, believe that the time is ripe for a breakthrough on several major campuses, which would create momentum elsewhere. A growing number of university administrators share the students' frustration with the slow pace of progress that has been made, and are willing to try a new approach.

Jim Wilkerson, Duke's director of trademark licensing, said the USAS proposal is "feasible and doable" and that "support is likely." If he's right, this will be a major step forward to rein in footloose apparel companies that exploit desperate workers. By showing that they care what they wear, students can set a standard for the rest of us. ■

*Richard Appelbaum teaches sociology and global and international studies at UC, Santa Barbara. Peter Dreier teaches public policy and political science at Occidental College.*