

Minutes of the WRC Board Meeting
March 12, 2021
(conducted by video conference)

Present at the meeting are Jill Esbenshade, Julie Farb, Mark Levinson, Julie Martínez Ortega, and Angeles Solis of the Advisory Council; Geoff Chatas, Rachel Duffy, Michael Ferrari, Alixe Holcomb, Kyle Muncy, and Craig Westemeier of the University Caucus; Victor Barratt-McCartney, Ketchel Carey, Sarim Karim, Blythe Serrano, Juliana Swift, and Aria Wanek of USAS.

WRC staff members in attendance are Scott Nova, Ben Hensler, Jessica Champagne, Rola Abimourched, Chelsea Rudman, Penelope Kyritsis, Vincent DeLaurentis, Liana Foxvog, Jewher Ilham, Kimberly Capehart, and Tara Mathur.

Observers in attendance are Cal Watson, Georgetown University.

Meeting was called to order at 11:04 by Board Chair, Angelis Solis.

Approval of Minutes of November Board Meeting

Rachel motioned to approve the November Board Meeting minutes. Julie M.O. seconded the motion. There was no opposition to the approval of the minutes; all board members approved.

Executive Director's Report

General Updates – Scott Nova

Scott congratulated former board member, Julie Su, on her nomination by President Biden as Deputy Secretary of Labor.

Scott discussed the military coup in Myanmar and the leading role garment workers and unions have played in protesting the coup. He also highlighted the impact this coup could have on labor rights in the country. Scott reported the WRC signed a joint letter condemning the coup and supporting the human rights and labor of the citizens of Myanmar.

Scott reported that the WRC has agreed to investigate allegations of gender-based violence and harassment at a non-collegiate factory in Tamil Nadu at the request of several partner organizations. Scott revealed there is an allegation that a factory manager murdered one of the women workers at this factory.

Scott updated the Board on the major challenging facing Alta Gracia and the likelihood that the company will close.

Scott informed the board that the WRC is looking for new office space because of severe space constraints in the current location and because the current commercial situation may present opportunities to get a good rental rate on a better space.

Jill inquired about rethinking the in-person nature of the Board Meetings. Scott replied that it is something for the board to consider for the next academic year as the spring meeting is currently planned to be online.

Scott announced that Rola Abimourched has become a member of the management team.

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in Lesotho – Rola Abimourched

Rola reviewed the WRC's engagement with Nien Hsing to remedy the gender-based violence and harassment that were occurring in the factory. She described the creation and launch of the Workers' Rights Watch (WRW), the independent investigative body that receives and responds to reports of gender-based violence and harassment under the agreements between brands, Nien Hsing, unions, and women's groups that the WRC helped to put in place. Rola reported the Covid-19 pandemic has had a slowing effect on the launch and implementation of this program. She added that educational trainings were moved to an online format and have begun for workers and that trainings for management are slated to start soon. She reported that WRW has received its first complaint and has begun investigating.

Open Apparel Registry – Rola Abimourched

Rola reported the WRC is snow ending factory disclosures that the WRC receives from affiliates to the Open Apparel Registry.

Uyghur Region – Ben Hensler and Jewher Ilham

Ben reviewed the WRC's initial engagement with the forced labor crisis in the Uyghur Region (UR). He provided an update to Badger Sport's remediation commitment to send contributions to Uyghur refugee organizations. Ben also reviewed the guidance the WRC has given to licensees. He gave an update on collegiate licensees who are ending their sourcing practices with suppliers that have been implicated in forced labor. Ben reviewed some of the challenges of current disclosure practices in cotton, yarn, and cloth. Jewher discussed a new initiative by Oritain to identify the origin of raw materials in a finished garment.

City of Madison – Ben Hensler

Ben reported on a new monitoring agreement with the City of Madison, Wisconsin for their Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium. Ben reviewed the WRC's work with the Cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco and the investigations and remediations at these factories that produce garments for public employees, such as firefighters, police, and other employees of the cities.

Executive Session

An executive session was held to discuss confidential financial and other matters.

Conflict of Interest Forms – Ben Hensler

Ben noted that the WRC's annual audit and the WRC's bylaws require the board to disclose if they have any conflicts of interest. Ben explained what a conflict of interest is and what it means

to have one and sit on the board or be a staff person. Ben further described what a board member should do if there is a conflict.

Set Next Board Date

Next Board Meeting: online Friday June 25, 2021.

Responding to the Global Pandemic – Laura Gutierrez, Tara Mathur, Scott Nova, Penelope Kyritsis

Laura recapped the investigation at a collegiate factory, Uni Gears, and the findings of wage theft against workers who were forced by the factory to resign. Laura noted that after extensive engagement with the collegiate licensee, Outerstuff, and the factory, 11 workers received their legally owed severance. The WRC is still investigating the case to see if more workers who were not paid severance can be identified.

Tara discussed the WRC's investigation into Elim, a factory in Guatemala, after complaints of violations of freedom of association. Tara noted that the WRC's findings showed that the factory closed as a result of a union attempting to form at the factory. She reported that brands the WRC has engaged with have agreed to pay the legally mandated severance to workers and agreed to cease all orders from any factory owned by Elim or similar management. Tara highlighted that payments to workers are currently underway this week. She concluded that the WRC will continue to monitor this case and plan to report publicly when the payments are complete.

Victor queried about other brands sourcing from Uni Gears. Laura noted Outerstuff was the main brand sourcing from the factory and that the leverage of Outerstuff, as a collegiate licensee, really made a difference in getting Uni Gears to remediate.

Ketchel inquired about the distributions for the workers at Elim. Tara answered that COVERCO is assisting in the distribution of the funds and is a trusted partner.

Scott reported on the pandemic-driven surge of unpaid severance and wage theft across the apparel industry and the WRC's extensive research on this subject. He noted that the WRC has made great efforts to track these severance violations since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and to tackle this pervasive wage theft on a global scale. Scott revealed a report that is forthcoming documenting 39 cases of partial or total severance theft.

Scott underscored that, while there have been significant cases of severance theft at collegiate factories, such factories were performing better, on average, than the industry as a whole. He noted that two-thirds of collegiate factories had paid workers in full.

Scott said he hopes the WRC's research will lead to remedial actions in the cases identified and also will help promote broader reform, including a potential binding agreement between unions and brands to guarantee severance to workers. Scott extended special thanks to the WRC's field staff, Liana, and other staff members who have collected this data and produced this report.

Penelope introduced and described the AHRC Study, which is funded by a recent grant the WRC received from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre. Penelope explained the broad definition of modern slavery that includes increased vulnerability to human rights abuses. She noted that the field staff have conducted a survey with over 1000 current and former garment workers. She added that the staff are currently conducting follow up interviews in each surveyed country, with analysis of the data to follow.

Sarim inquired about the safety challenges in data collection. Penelope responded that the WRC is taking every appropriate precaution available to keep staff and workers safe, including special precautions in Myanmar.

Rachel motioned to adjourn the meeting. Craig seconded the motion, which carried unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 3:37 p.m.