

Minutes of the WRC Board Meeting February 2, 2024

The meeting was held at Georgetown University and on Zoom.

Present at the meeting in person were Mike Ferrari, Sam Harasen, Alixe Holcomb, Kyle Muncy, Cal Watson, and Craig Westemeier of the University Caucus; Mark Levinson, Julie Martinez Ortega, and Angeles Solis of the Advisory Council; Madison Allen, Joshua Gavsie, Tanvi Kamath, Fiona Naughton, and Grace Orellana, of USAS.

Board Members attending via Zoom were Jill Esbenshade and Mark Pearce of the Advisory Council.

WRC staff members in attendance in person were Scott Nova, Ben Hensler, Jessica Champagne, Rola Abimourched, and Kimberly Capehart.

WRC staff member Thulsi Narayanasamy and WRC Field Representative, Bangladesh attended via Zoom.

Observers in attendance in person were Makayla Heiser and Kelsey Coleman of USAS.

Julie Farb of the Advisory Council was absent.

The meeting was called to order at 9:15 a.m. by the substitute Board Chair, Mark Levinson.

Approval of Agenda and Minutes from the September Board Meeting

Julie M.O. moved to approve the agenda. Kyle seconded. All Board members voted in favor.

Kyle moved to approve the September Board Meeting minutes. Josh seconded. All Board members voted in favor.

Executive Director's Report

Welcome and Organizational Overview – Scott Nova

Scott noted that the WRC has expanded its scope of work in terms of geography and has taken on more work than ever, primarily but not exclusively involving university factories. He added that both the volume and impact of work have continued to increase. To illustrate, Scott reviewed a case that the WRC recently resolved that protected hundreds of migrant workers in Jordan from massive wage theft. Their factory closed with many workers owed as much as nine months of unpaid wages. Instead of ensuring workers were paid, Scott reported that the Jordan government pressured workers to leave the country without their pay. After the WRC documented the violations and intervened with brands, workers were paid in full – nearly three million dollars – all of it paid by the brands (since the owner had fled the country and could not be forced to pay).

Personnel Updates – Jess Champagne

Jess provided updated on the WRC staffing, including the WRC adding a new part-time field position: Field Representative, Haiti. She also reviewed the global, week-long all staff meeting that was held in October, the first since before the pandemic, which included skill shares, technical trainings, as well as staff team building.

Minimum Wage Setting and Anti-worker Violence in Bangladesh – Thulsi Narayanasamy and WRC Field Representative, Bangladesh

Thulsi provided a brief update on the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh, the increasingly prominent role it plays in the global export market, and the unusual power of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) in influencing the Bangladeshi government to suppress workers' rights. As a result of this suppression, Thulsi discussed the costs of living crisis for garment workers in Bangladesh and how, with all other options foreclosed, the only avenue for workers to fight for their rights has been through wildcat strikes and mass protest.

She then reviewed the minimum wage setting process that occurs in Bangladesh every five years and the lack of genuine representation of workers in the process. When factory owners proposed a wage that was less than half of that proposed by a broad coalition of unions and civil society organizations in the country, Thulsi reported on the outcry and subsequent protests by workers. Despite the primarily peaceful nature of the mass protests, Thulsi discussed the extensive and often brutal violence the military and police inflicted upon the workers, resulting in four deaths, and hundreds of injuries. She reviewed the collective efforts of the BGMEA to punish workers for exercising their rights of association through blacklisting, illegally withholding pay, and filing bogus criminal cases, now pending against thousands of workers and worker-leaders. Thulsi then outlined the WRC's work to meet this immediate crisis: (1) investigating and documenting the government violence; (2) conducting research to identify factories involved in bringing false charges and the brands they supply; (3) engaging brands, including collegiate licensees, urging them to press their suppliers to withdraw false charges; and (4) engaging international media to highlight the plight of workers.

Thulsi also discussed the WRC's work in advance of the government's decision on the minimum wage, highlighting the role of brands in squeezing suppliers on prices and therefore deeply influencing the outcome of the wage setting process in the country, despite the brands' own public "living wage" commitments. Thulsi explained that the final wage that was set is at a level far below the wage needed for workers to support their families. She explained that the increase in the minimum wage, will be completely eroded well before the new wage is set again in five years. She reported that the WRC will continue to work on this situation including seeking the removal of bogus criminal charges against workers.

Board members asked a number of questions regarding brands' engagement in the process, the ongoing pattern of inadequate wage setting, worker protest, and violent backlash, and role of the US government.

Field Report: Case Updates

Hong Seng – Scott Nova

Scott reviewed the wage theft case at Hong Seng Knitting, a collegiate supplier to Nike, located in Thailand. He provided a recap of the case and of Nike's unwillingness to acknowledge the violations. He updated the Board on the WRC's engagement with Nike, and the latter's continued refusal to remediate beyond a handful of workers who had the fortitude to bring cases to the Thai labor ministry in the face of employer threats and intimidation. Scott expressed his concern that the most prominent licensee in the collegiate sphere is acting with such disregard for university standards in a case that is so clear cut, and the potential precedent-setting nature of a large university licensee not complying with university codes of conduct. Scott highlighted

some non-collegiate advocacy work being done by organizations around this case, including actions by many of Nike's investors, challenging Nike on this issue.

Brief Case Overviews – Rola Abimourched

Rola briefly reviewed nine mostly collegiate cases that were successfully remediated in recent months. These cases included Premium Apparel in Haiti (severance), Denim Clothing Company in Pakistan (underpayment of minimum wage and severance), Horizon Manufacturing in Haiti (severance), Base Textile in Bangladesh (severance), Mazava Hispaniola in Haiti (gender-based violence and harassment), Suditi Industries in India (subminimum wages, unpaid overtime, health and safety), Westtex in El Salvador (freedom of association), Sun Shui Shing in Cambodia (freedom of association gender-based violence and harassment), and Quantum Apparel in Cambodia (freedom of association).

International Accord for Health and Safety: International Negotiations and Implementation in Pakistan – Scott Nova

Scott updated the Board on the International Accord. He discussed some key outcomes of recent negotiations: it was agreed that all signatories to the Bangladesh and Pakistan Accords must also sign the International Accord; that the RMG Sustainability Council model will not be replicated in any other country in the near term; and that expansion of the Accord to new countries will proceed expeditiously, as soon as a certain level of progress has been achieved in each new country (e.g. when certain benchmarks are reached under the new program in Pakistan, expansion to a new country will be automatic).

Scott presented the current status of collegiate signatories and non-collegiate US signatories to the International Accord and the Pakistan Accord.

Set Meeting Date

Next meeting date: Thursday, June 6.

Internal Policy Updates

Bylaws – Ben Hensler

Ben outlined a proposed change to the bylaws to reflect the scope of the WRC's work, which includes, in addition to the primary focus on university licensed merchandise, investigations and projects involving non-collegiate factories and products other than apparel. After discussion, the Board took action on one element of the proposal. Kyle moved to approve a set of amendments to Section 1.2 of the bylaws, inserting the words "products and" before the existing word "merchandise" every place in the section that the latter appears. Josh seconded. All Board members voted in favor.

The new text appears in bold below:

Section 1.2 PURPOSE. The corporation, which is not a membership organization, shall be established and maintained for the following purposes:

1. to promote socially responsible initiatives by universities and colleges, and by manufacturers who use the indicia of those universities and colleges, for the improvement of working conditions and labor standards in domestic and global production of those **products and** merchandise;
2. to promote in the community of universities, colleges and manufacturers, through education and research, awareness of and appropriate responses to production of

products and merchandise bearing college and university indicia under ethically unacceptable working conditions such as sweated, child, sub-living-wage, discriminatory, unsafe, and other forms of abusive labor;

3. to codify and promote compliance with ethical standards of conduct by college and university licensors, and by manufacturers who use the indicia of those universities and colleges, including but not limited to standards for living wages, child labor, women's rights, the right to organize and bargain collectively, and health and safety, in light of the "Key WRC Principles" set forth in Annex I of these bylaws;
4. to gather and publicly disseminate information regarding the locations and conditions of workplaces where **products and** merchandise bearing college and university indicia is produced;
5. Paragraphs (1) through (4) may also apply to such other goods as both the corporation and the respective affiliated institution shall agree to.
6. to conduct such other monitoring and/or educational efforts as the Board of Directors deems appropriate.

As to other elements of the proposal, the Board agreed to wait on action, with Jill and Ben agreeing to meet to develop simpler alternate language.

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment – Rola Abimourched

Rola provided a brief update on the WRC's GBVH policy and the Investigation Taskforce, which protects people who work at and with the WRC. She outlined a staff-proposed change to the policy, under which Investigation Taskforce members rotate every two years, instead of every one year, in order to allow for continuity on the Taskforce. The Board discussed the proposal. WRC staff will edit according to this feedback and send it to the Board via email for approval.

Executive Session

An executive session was held to discuss confidential financial, administrative, and programmatic matters.

Kyle moved to adjourn. Craig seconded. All were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 3:00 p.m.