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Activists take on maker of baseball caps

Allege that New York company is sweatshop and union-buster

By Elizabeth Neuffer, Globe Staff, 8/24/2001

NEW YORK - Student activists who have successfully focused public attention on sweatshop conditions at factories that produce university-licensed wear have a bigger target in their sights: Major League Baseball.

A report issued this week by an antisweatshop monitoring group alleges that the New Era Cap Co. in Derby, N.Y., which produces hats worn by all 30 Major League teams, engages in union-busting tactics and tolerates working conditions that have led to higher-than-average injury rates among employees.

Workers at the plant - which also is one of three manufacturers of official baseball caps for fans - have been on strike since July. They also make caps for 98 colleges, which is how complaints reached the Worker Rights Consortium, formed by universities and colleges to monitor their licensees and which issued this week's critical report.

Student activists say they are now planning how to raise national ire over working conditions at the plant, targeting not just universities but possibly professional baseball fans.

"Everyone is certain that New Era will be a fall campaign," said Bhumika Muchhala of Students Against Sweatshops, with chapters on more than 200 campuses around the country.

The report on New Era reflects that student activists - who turned concern over labor conditions in factories overseas making university-licensed wear into a nationwide protest are focusing on issues closer to home. Other anti-sweatshop groups this year have also alleged that professional sports leagues, such as the NBA, have apparel bearing their logo made by poorly paid workers in the Third World.

The report, which includes evidence gathered from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Labor Relations Board, is highly critical.

"We found substantial evidence of serious violations of health and safety and freedom of association," said Scott Nova, the group's executive director.

The study, among other findings, revealed that the rate of cut and puncture injuries at the plant was 15 times the industry average. It also concluded that New Era, a family-owned

company, failed to protect workers from diseases caused by repetitive motion, concluding that the rate of musculo-skeletal disorders is "extraordinarily high."

"I've had carpal tunnel surgery, a ruptured disc in my back," said union representative Jane Howald. "And the company makes light of it."

At New Era, however, top management argues the report is biased, reflecting the views of the plant's new union, the Communications Workers of America, which workers joined three years ago.

"The claims we are a sweatshop are a typical union tactic," said Tim Freer, director of human resources. He said the company tried to address worker's health and safety concerns.

The union has alleged the company is punishing workers by moving some operations to a nonunion plant in Alabama, and workers walked off the job last month in an effort to protest a proposal to reduce wages unless efficiency at the New York plant improved.

"This is the least-efficient plant with the worst attendance record," said company chief financial officer Peter Augustine. "Every attempt we have made to improve efficiency has been met with resistance."

New Era is not the first major sports company to come under suspicion of sweatshop labor. Nike, Adidas, and Puma, as well as stores such as The Gap, have also been linked with sweatshop labor.

Earlier this year, the New York-based National Labor Committee for Human Rights contended that some apparel carrying the National Basketball Association logo was made under sweatshop conditions in El Salvador.

It is, however, a first for baseball.

A spokesman for Major League Baseball confirmed it has received letters from the players' union, the Major League Baseball Players Association, but made no further comment.

Gene Orza, the union's associate general counsel, said whether the league should look elsewhere for its caps is "currently under discussion." Allegations against the cap manufacturer have been raised in discussions with some players, he said, but he declined to name them.

Should New Era move its production to nonunion plants in Alabama, he added, "that would have the effect of busting the union, and we are upset about that." Individual teams themselves are not involved with questions of what they wear or sell with their logos on it.

New Era is the only company licensed to produce official caps for players, a right it acquired for \$80 million. It is one of three companies that produce official baseball caps for fans. Proceeds from those sales are typically split among the Major League's members.

Sales of licensed baseball merchandise bring in about \$100 million per year, according to Andrew Zimbalist, professor of economics at Smith College. But baseball caps only account for about \$5 million to \$10 million of that, and only about \$3 million is eventually split

among teams.

"It's a substantial number but only a small share of the total," Zimbalist said.

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