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University concerned about sweatshop labor

Students, officials hope to reach out to other schools

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With increasing globalization and opening of new markets, businesses struggle to remain competitive-sometimes at the cost of human rights.

Though some businesses cut expenses by decreasing employee salary and hiring children, the University of Miami has joined a variety of organizations to help ensure the welfare of workers who make UM apparel overseas.

For instance, UM is a member of the Designated Suppliers Program (DSP), a group of 18 universities, two colleges and one student organization-the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS).

The DSP is a sub-division of the Worker Rights Consortium, an international organization monitoring factories to decrease sweatshops. The university is also a member of the Fair Labor Association, another sweatshop watchdog.

Students believe the university's involvement in these organizations is a step toward ensuring the rights of foreign workers who manufacture apparel with UM's logo.

"It doesn't take a whole lot to provide a decent standard of living for factory workers," said Liza Alwes, a senior and USAS member. "At least in university apparel, there is something concrete that students can do."

Alwes and other USAS members work closely with Mel Tenen, the assistant vice president of auxiliary services, and Alan Fish, the vice president of business services.

"DSP is working to ensure that factories of licensees are up to restringing codes," Tenen said. The university has 450 licensees who deal with more than 5,000 factories that produce UM goods.

The WRC sends inspectors to the factories of licensees where the auditors check if the

workers are receiving a sufficient wage to cover basic expenses, such as nutrition, energy and potable water.

The auditors check that workers have the right to join a labor union, work only up to 48 hours and get at least one day off per week, receive pay for voluntary overtime, are not under the age of 15, are not forced to work and receive other basic rights.

"We should be concerned about the welfare of the workers around the world who produce university goods," Tenen said.

Companies such as Nike have factories in places like Turkey, El Salvador, Taiwan, Mexico, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and the United States.

Tenen said when a factory is not complying with the guidelines presented by the WRC and if an auditor discovers the violations, the news is sent to the WRC who in turn advise the licensors.

Recently, Tenen received a letter from the WRC informing him that two factories were not providing fair conditions for their employees. One of the factories in El Salvador belongs to a UM licensee.

Tenen then sent a letter to the WRC which will be forwarded to the licensee, Russell Athletics Corporation. In the letter, Tenen wrote that if the licensee does not immediately improve the condition of the factory in question, then the university will no longer allow them to manufacture UM goods.

"We cut them off hard and fast," Tenen said, adding that the university is the 15th largest university licensor in the US.

In order to maintain the goals of the DSP, the WRC coordinates annual meetings for DSP members that take place at Georgetown University. So far, UM has taken three or four students to the last three meetings.

Currently, UM is the only Florida university member of the DSP. To change this, Alwes tried to organize a summit for the spring term where other Florida universities would be encouraged to follow UM's example.

"If you're a major licensee, you should be a member," Tenen said.

Alwes said the idea to hold the summit came out of a conversation USAS members had with UM's administration.

The spring summit did not occur due to the uncertainty of other universities and students across the state being able to participate in the summit. It has been postponed for the fall term.

The universities-administrations and student bodies included-Alwes hoped to reach out to include the University of Florida, Florida State University, University of Central Florida and Florida International University.

Organizers hope bringing these and other institutions in to the mix will be a positive.

"The only way I see we can really help workers' rights in foreign countries is through [the] buying power of universities," Fish said. "We need the power of 100 to 200 universities to change conditions in other countries."

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