Latin Sweatshops Pressed by U.S. Campus Power

Dominican Plant Signs Labor Pact

By DAVID GONZALEZ
VILLA ALTAGRACIA, Dominican Republic, March 21 — When workers first tried unionizing the B&J factory that is the town's biggest employer, the streets were abuzz with rumors that the factory would rather close down than negotiate.

Two years later, not only is the factory still around, but there is also a union, and it recently negotiated a labor contract that provides raises, scholarships and other benefits that are unheard of among the country's 500 foreign-owned plants.

The pact, signed last week, was the latest victory for a once unlikely coalition of United States college students, labor activists and world-class brands like Nike and Reebok working to improve labor conditions in the factories in developing countries that make caps and clothing emblazoned with university names and mascots.

The B&J factory, which employs about 1,600 people, was the focus of the first campaigns against sweatshops in the United States that were aimed at globalizing the 1990's. Labor leaders here and abroad this year say the factory is probably the largest facility in the free-trade zones of the Caribbean, Central America or Mexico to have been unionized.

The zones were set up in recent decades with tax breaks and other incentives to create jobs by attracting international manufacturers. But only a handful here, or elsewhere, have unions at all. The union at B&J was the first formed in a free zone in five years.

The success follows a similar victory for labor leaders in Mexico. The organizers here hope that it may provide incentive to other factories, though most workers will lack the leverage that came from the coalition of students, university officials and big-name brands.

B&J itself has made maps for major company like Nike and Reebok and for athletic powerhouse schools like Penn State and the University of California.

"I never thought a group of students would have come together to do this," said Ignacio Hernandez, the general secretary of the Federation of Free Trade Zones Unions. "We were determined to win, but without it we would have taken a step forward in the fight for our rights.

And it would have been more traumatic without them because all we would have been was the pressure to strike."  

Still, the process was not easy — the factory had to be pressured several times into rehiring union members who were dismissed on the flimsiest of pretexts. At one point, the American brand had to fire a union official. The fact that the union had already met the local labor laws, it agreed to the union's demands. He said that the contract made the factory more transparent.

Doug Cahn, vice president for human rights programs at Reebok International Ltd. "There are few other examples of this where difficult issues were resolved.

Within that process, the university and students were able to bring the table a certain influence usually absent during such negotiations: the reputation of the school whose name is on the cap or the student who is eager to serve the athletic brand.

"We are the target market of a lot of these brands and they want a positive image on campus because they want consumers for life," said Molly McGrath, development director at United Students Against Sweatshops. "We also have the moral and ethical argument being on the side of a university, so we can pressure the university to use their leverage in society to change the policies of the brands."

She was looking to see the brands act a little faster in the future, she said, to avoid the kinds of repeated firings that marred the B&J negotiation. Union leaders said the average wage for workers was $3 a week.

That a pact was reached at all was perhaps the most surprising and gratifying turn of events for Rut Tuttle, who manages the licensing program for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which nets some $4 million annually. He had gone to Villa Altgracia to visit with workers last year.

"We have been in their houses and seen how they are trying to hold things together, and this collective bargaining agreement has got to make a difference in their lives," he said. "I hope it's what they need or a step to what they need."

Patricia Grateron, a factory worker and single mother who looks forward to the 10 percent raise, said that she hoped this effort would help with help from the factory's scholarship fund.

"Before, you could not do that," she said. "Now you can. At least, I think I can."