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Rutgers University to cut ties to apparel company accused of inhumane work conditions

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As Russell Corporation responds to allegations about inhumane work conditions at its factory in Honduras, Rutgers University has announced it will end its licensing agreement with the apparel company.

The university will not renew its contract with Russell when it expires next month, said Rutgers spokesman E.J. Miranda. The decision was made "because of the concerns raised by students on this issue," Miranda said.

The students leading the campaign against Russell say the Atlanta-based company closed a factory in Honduras last week as retaliation against the workers' union. The 1,800 workers at the plant, Jerzees de Honduras, had recently unionized and were trying to negotiate their first collective bargaining agreement.

Russell has said closing the plant was an unrelated economic decision.

"We're calling on all universities to cut their licensing contract with Russell, unless they reopen the factory at full capacity, ensuring that the union workers remain employed," said Rod Palmquist, the international campaign manager for United Students Against Sweatshops, a 10-year-old organization that campaigns for workers' rights in plants that manufacture university apparel.

A Workers Rights Consortium report, dated Nov. 7, concluded that the decision to close the plant was related to the workers' union activities, and noted a 2007 finding that Russell had fired 145 workers at the two Honduran plants in retaliation for their union activities.

United Students Against Sweatshops protested at universities through the United States, calling on the administrations to end their licensing agreements with the manufacturer. Russell responded by offering to reinstate the dismissed workers.

According to the most recent Workers Rights Consortium Report, the union and company declared an impasse in their negotiations Oct. 3. Russell announced plans to close the plant Oct. 8.

At issue was the workers' base salary after the union declined the company's final offer of a 16-cents-per-day raise over three years. The raise would have increased wages to \$7.91 per day, according to the report.

Rutgers is a member of the Workers Rights Consortium, a group of 185 colleges and universities nationwide that have adopted a code of conduct requiring university-licensed apparel to be manufactured in plants with ethically responsible labor practices.

Three other consortium schools — Georgetown University, the University of Miami and the University of Houston — have ended their licensing agreements with Russell, Palmquist said.

In a letter sent to the student newspaper, the Daily Targum, on Thursday, the assistant director of the university's trademark licensing office wrote that the situation in Honduras "was a decisive factor in the university's decision not to renew Russell's license agreement."

"After discussing this issue with the students, I consulted with several university leaders, and we decided that Rutgers will not renew the trademark licensing agreement with Russell Apparel that expires next month," Marybeth Schmutz wrote.

The university bookstores do not sell any Russell products, Miranda said. The university has licensing agreements with more than 150 other apparel manufacturers.