

USC apparel makers under fire

Labor: Worker Rights Consortium reports could cause school to terminate licensing contracts if factories fail to improve

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USC may end its contracts with three apparel vendors in response to reports alleging sweatshop-like conditions in two factories that produce university products.

The reports, issued by the Worker Rights Consortium, allege numerous health, safety and labor violations in factories used by the New Era Cap Company, the official provider of hats for USC's baseball team; American Needle, a hat producer; and Top of the World, which produces hats and jerseys. New Era's Derby, N.Y., factory and the PT Dada factory in Indonesia, which American Needle and Top of the World use, have received the violations.

"If New Era fails to uphold the integrity of the USC name, we will pull their product off the shelf," said Philip Chiaramonte, director of Auxiliary Services. "If they do not remedy their current situation, their contract will not be renewed by USC."

But Liz Kennedy, director of Trademarks and Licensing, said USC will not immediately end its contract with New Era.

"We can not take the WRC's report as an absolute indicator of the New Era situation," Kennedy said. "We will not cut and run from these companies (that engage in labor violations)."

Although the university is waiting for more reports on the New Era factory, its products should be pulled from the Pertusati University bookstore immediately, said Chrysta Wilson, a student senator and senior majoring in public policy and management.

John Rinehart, a member of the Student Coalition Against Labor Exploitation and senior

majoring in political science, agreed.

"It's despicable if USC continues to sell sweatshop-made products," Rinehart said.

The report against New Era's labor practices alleges violations such as failing to permit the unionization of workers, intense ongoing anti-union hostility, and the company's refusal to protect workers from "severe musculo-skeletal disorders, injuries caused by needle punctures, and the risk of exposure to blood borne pathogens resulting from various types of accidents and injuries." The report also accuses New Era of having an extremely high injury rate in its New York plant.

Georgetown University, Duke University, the University of Iowa and the University of Wisconsin, Madison have terminated their contracts with the cap company, according to the Michigan Daily. The University of Michigan is considering ending its contract with New Era.

In addition to the New Era report released in August 2001, the WRC released a report Wednesday alleging labor and human rights violations at the PT Dada factory in Indonesia. The allegations include physical, sexual and racial harassment and discriminatory religious practices. The factory also allegedly forced employees to work without pay and placed workers who spoke up against such abuses in solitary confinement.

Though officials at Top of the World and American Needle are working to improve the situation at PT Dada, USC officials are hesitant to act because the university is not a member of the WRC, which issued the reports.

But USC is a member of the Fair Labor Association, which only allows USC to license its logo to companies who are also FLA members.

But the Office of Trademarks and Licensing, relaxed this requirement, asking its vendors to only be in the process of applying for FLA membership. Of 221 licensees of USC products, 108 are not FLA members, including New Era and Top of the World.

If New Era and Top of the World do not comply with FLA membership requirements by mid-May, their licenses would likely not be renewed, Kennedy said.

"(Not renewing the licenses is) a step in the right direction toward ridding USC of sweatshop-made products," Wilson said.

Regardless, Top of the World and American Needle officials said they are working to improve the situation.

"We are willing to comply completely to rectify the situation at PT Dada," said Scott Jacobs, vice president of Top of the World.

The company has been working with the WRC for the past two months to correct the labor abuses, Jacobs said.

"We are behind the WRC 100 percent," he added.

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