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Campus Breakthrough on Sweatshop Labor

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Student activists at the University of California have achieved a significant victory in restraining the forces of unregulated globalization. UC president Robert Dynes announced in May that the ten-campus system had pledged its "full and enthusiastic engagement" with an antisweatshop policy advocated for the past year by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), a national coalition.

The so-called Designated Suppliers Program (DSP) commits the UC system, with more than 200,000 students, to purchase much of the clothing bearing UC campus logos only from factories that have been approved by an independent board that evaluates employers' respect for workers' rights. Approval will be given to factories that pay a living wage (based on the cost of living in each country), follow adequate labor standards and allow workers to form independent unions or other worker-sponsored organizations. In the first year, at least 25 percent of all UC apparel will come from these designated suppliers, which will also be required to specialize in producing items for colleges and universities. If the program is successful, that figure will increase in future years, according to the agreement.

For the past year, students at dozens of campuses around the country organized hunger strikes, rallies, antisweatshop fashion shows and other protests to demand that their institutions adopt strong policies to police companies that make clothing for the campus market. In the past two months, activists at UC-Berkeley and UC-Riverside engaged in sit-ins that led to arrests to put pressure on president Dynes and the university's chancellors, who ultimately endorsed the policy. Nineteen colleges and universities--including Duke, Indiana, Wisconsin, Georgetown, Connecticut, Syracuse and Columbia--have already agreed to support the DSP. By joining this group, the University of California--the largest university system in the country--adds considerable momentum to the antisweatshop cause. The ten campuses of the University of California system, taken together, are among the largest purchasers of collegiate apparel to adopt the new system. Last year, UC campuses had more than 1,000 separate licensing agreements with apparel makers, resulting in sales approaching \$40 million.

The UC agreement is by far the most important victory for the student antisweatshop movement that began a decade ago at Duke University. Since then, some well-publicized gains have been made, including recognition of employee-run unions in some factories, limits on mandatory and unpaid overtime, and a decline in sexual harassment of female employees.

Seven years ago, for example, Nike refused student demands to disclose the names and addresses of its factories engaged in producing college clothing, preventing human rights groups from monitoring workplace conditions. Nike claimed that these were business secrets that, if made public, would put the company at a competitive disadvantage. In 2004, bowing to student pressure, Nike voluntarily published the names and addresses of all its factories, not just those catering to the college market--a major reversal of policy. With the help of outside consultants,

Nike also examined the working and environmental conditions in 569 factories around the world that produce the company's apparel, equipment and footwear.

To the surprise of many consumer activists, Nike publicly released this very critical report and pledged to clean up its act. Nike's change of heart would not have been possible without persistent pressure by student, consumer and labor groups. But these antisweatshop crusaders don't want to depend on global companies policing themselves to enforce decent standards in their factories. In the past decade, some 200 colleges and universities--including the UC system--adopted antisweatshop codes of conduct in response to student protest. They viewed university licensing agreements as leverage to get global companies to improve conditions in factories they use as subcontractors. But student activists and some university administrators became increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of progress in implementing the campus codes.

Global apparel firms like Nike, Champion and Russell Athletic currently make clothing for the \$3 billion college market in thousands of factories around the world. Their college-bound goods are only a small fraction of total production in each factory. Neither the universities nor the student activist groups had the resources to monitor all these workplaces and hold them accountable to the antisweatshop standards.

In collaboration with human rights groups, unions and faculty experts on the apparel industry, campus activists developed the DSP to give universities a mechanism to enforce their antisweatshop codes. With the help of the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an independent monitoring organization with 152 member colleges and universities, USAS has identified a number of factories around the world--particularly in Asia, Mexico, Central America and the United States--that could qualify under these more stringent worker-friendly standards. Alternatively, major brands like Nike could identify one of their major suppliers to specialize in producing clothing for the university market under the terms of the DSP.

The new UC agreement requires its licensees to pay factories prices that are high enough so that workers can be paid a living wage. Even if higher costs are passed on to consumers, price increases would be trivial. Apparel workers in developing countries typically earn 1 percent to 2 percent of the retail price. If paying a living wage doubled workers' wages, a \$25 sweatshirt with the campus logo would cost only 50 cents or a dollar more. This is small change for a college student, but a major improvement for a low-wage worker.

Apparel makers are among the most mobile industry in the global economy. Most clothing worn by Americans is made in sweatshops, increasingly located in China. The new UC agreements show that conscientious consumers, particularly those on college campuses, can have an impact on humanizing the forces of global capitalism. It may seem a long way from Berkeley to Beijing, but the decision made by UC administrators could have major ripple effects in improving the lives of factory workers around the globe.

By adopting USAS's Dedicated Suppliers Program, the UC system has taken a major step forward in reining in footloose apparel companies that exploit desperate workers. Campus crusaders view their efforts as part of a broader "fair trade" movement. Student activists believe that if enough universities adopt these standards, the number of sweat-free factories will steadily increase. This will demonstrate that even in the highly competitive global clothing industry, companies can do the right thing by their employees and make a profit.

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