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U. to join worker rights group

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The University will submit its application for membership in the Worker Right Consortium (WRC) within the next few days, said Vice President and Secretary Bob Durkee '69, after years of debate by the Resources Committee of the Council of the Princeton University Community (CPUC).

The WRC is a non-profit organization whose goal is to ensure that worker rights are upheld in factories that manufacture university merchandise, according to its website. More than 150 colleges and universities are affiliated with the WRC, including all of the Ivy League except Yale and Dartmouth.

Joining the WRC will complement the University's membership in the Fair Labor Association (FLA), President Tilghman said in an e-mail.

"We have been members of the Fair Labor Association for some time, which is also dedicated to ensuring that companies that produce footwear and clothing that bear the university brand are manufactured in factories that treat their workers fairly," Tilghman said.

"The WRC provides a complementary approach to that important goal," she explained. "We hope that by being a member of both organizations, we can promote cooperation between the groups, in the interests of furthering their common laudable goals."

In 1999, the University was one of the first schools to join the FLA, shortly after its creation, Durkee said.

Princeton for Worker Rights (PWR), a student group, amassed 1,300 signatures from students and faculty during the 2006-07 school year to lobby the University to join the WRC. PWR then submitted the petition to the CPUC Resources Committee.

The Resources Committee had previously decided not to advise the University to join the WRC because it doubted the organization's effectiveness, Durkee explained. After receiving the petition, however, the committee recommended to Tilghman in September 2007 that the University begin to develop a relationship with the WRC. Tilghman agreed to its recommendations in December 2007.

"I think this is an issue that we're confronted with every day when we're thinking about what makes the University run and who makes the clothes I wear," said Benjamin McKean GS, who is the Graduate Student Government's representative to the Resources Committee.

"I benefit tremendously from being a student here, obviously, and I think it's important that the people that make that possible are treated fairly," he said, adding that he hoped the University's membership in the WRC would lead to greater awareness among the student body and would increase the University's ability to protect worker rights.

"With all of our billions of dollars of endowment, it's a little thing for us to do," said Sian Ofaolain '08, who worked on the PWR petition after spending the summer before her junior year in Mexico promoting labor rights and seeing that factory workers appreciated the WRC's work.

"It is important to understand how our actions affect other countries and people, to see ourselves as part of a greater whole," Ofaolain explained.

Nolan McCarty, chair of the Resources Committee and acting Wilson School dean, officially recommended to Tilghman that the University join the WRC.

“It’s important that the University takes some responsibility for conditions of factories [making Princeton merchandise],” McCarty said.

He noted, however, that the situation is not as clear-cut as some would make it out to be.

“There is a delicate balancing act between ethical concerns and the reality of economic development in various countries,” he said. “What standards do we apply? We can’t just unreflectively apply U.S. standards,” he added.

“Both the FLA and the WRC are very good at this balancing act,” McCarty said, adding that another reason the University decided to join the WRC was that the organization provides more opportunities for student involvement than the FLA.

Durkee emphasized that the University has been very active in the FLA since it joined and has significantly shaped the organization’s agenda. He also stressed that joining the WRC would not change the University’s actions regarding worker rights but that “by joining the organization we get to be part of the conversation of where it goes from here.”

The University hopes that its involvement with both the FLA and WRC will facilitate cooperation between the two, Durkee said. “Combining resources and working cooperatively will increase the impact,” he explained.

While the FLA’s strength is monitoring factory compliance with worker rights standards, Durkee explained that the WRC is good at “putting a particular factory in the limelight” to increase awareness and advocacy. The goals of the two organizations are thus complementary, he noted.

The University's workplace code of conduct for factories that produce black and orange merchandise is the one set by the FLA. The code prohibits forced labor, child labor, harassment or abuse, discrimination and required overtime, while at the same time mandating a safe and healthy working environment, freedom to unionize, wages and benefits in accordance with the law, and proper compensation for overtime.

The PWR will seek to raise worker rights awareness by inviting speakers to campus in the coming months.

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