

Today's News

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2 More Universities Cut Ties With Apparel Company

By LIBBY SANDER

Two more universities have joined the growing list of institutions that have cut ties with apparel maker Russell Athletic over the company's alleged mistreatment of unionized workers at one of its plants in Honduras.

On Friday, Cornell University and Pennsylvania State University announced that they have terminated their licensing agreements with the Russell Corporation and will not renew the contracts when they expire, in both cases, at the end of March.

Several other institutions—including Duke, Georgetown, Purdue, and Rutgers Universities, and the Universities of Houston, Miami, and Wisconsin at Madison—have also recently ended their licensing relationships with the Atlanta-based company.

The universities cited concerns surrounding Russell's announcement in October that it would close a garment factory in Honduras where many workers had unionized. A recent investigation by a watchdog group, the Workers Rights Consortium, concluded that the company closed the Jerzees de Honduras plant, in Choloma, Honduras, in part because of anti-union animus.

Russell, which is a subsidiary of Fruit of the Loom Inc., has said that it closed the factory for economic reasons.

The plant's 1,800 workers assembled apparel featuring university logos. Many had joined a union that was organized last year to seek higher wages, according to a report the Workers Rights Consortium released in November.

The report alleged that managers at the factory were openly hostile to union members and threatened retaliation for union membership before the company closed the plant altogether last month.

'A Good Time to Separate'

At Cornell, Russell apparel accounts for about \$500,000 in annual sales in the campus bookstore, said Mike Powers, director of operations for university communications at Cornell, who oversees product licensing for the university.

Cornell officials had been monitoring the situation in Honduras since the early fall, Mr. Powers said,

receiving regular updates from the Workers Rights Consortium and another advocacy group, the Fair Labor Association, which had also been investigating the situation.

“Everyone agreed this was the right thing to do,” Mr. Powers said on Friday, referring to Cornell’s top administrators. “We decided this was a clear-cut case and a good time to separate with Russell.”

Penn State also announced on Friday that it would terminate its licensing agreement with Russell.

“We have an option to review the Russell contract on an annual basis, and the review normally occurs around this time,” Lisa Powers, a spokeswoman for the university, said in an e-mail message. “As part of our regular review of business, we decided to terminate the relationship.”

Other universities are reportedly considering similar action. Student activism on the issue has been continuing for several months, featuring protests, marches, letter-writing campaigns, and editorials in campus newspapers urging universities to cut ties with Russell.

Former workers at the plant have also toured the country speaking to students and university administrators at some campuses about their experiences.

Mr. Powers said he expected more universities to follow suit. “You’re going to see a bit of a snowball effect now,” he said. “I know more schools are looking at this.”

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