

Minutes of the WRC Board Meeting October 21, 2022

The meeting was held at Georgetown University and on Zoom.

Present at the meeting in person were Alixe Holcomb, Kyle Muncy, and Craig Westemeier of the University Caucus; Julie Farb, Mark Levinson, and Angeles Solis of the Advisory Council; Shreya Basu, Carmen Metoyer, Madeline Rogers, and Nicole Snyder of USAS.

Board Members attending via Zoom were Jill Esbenshade, Mark Levinson, and Julie Martínez Ortega of the Advisory Council, Rachel Duffy, Michael Ferrari, and Cal Watson of the University Caucus, Kelsey Coleman and of USAS.

Mark Pearce of the Advisory Council was absent.

WRC staff members in attendance in person were Scott Nova, Ben Hensler, Jessica Champagne, and Rola Abimourched. WRC staff members attending via Zoom are Manodeep Guha, Vincent Holmes, Thulsi Narayanasamy, and Sarah Reed.

Observers in attendance in person were Jess Dampier, USAS, Makayla Heiser, USAS, and Shunji Fueki, WRC intern. Observers in attendance on Zoom were Leigha Ellis, USAS.

Meeting was called to order at 9:02 by Alixe on behalf of Board Chair, Rachel.

Approval of Minutes of May Board Meeting

Craig moved to approve the May Board Meeting minutes. Alixe seconded. All board members voted in favor.

Board Officer Elections

Alixé introduced the nominees for new board positions as follows: Shreya from USAS was nominated to be Board Chair; Cal from the University Caucus was nominated to be Secretary; Jill from the Advisory Council was nominated to be Treasurer, who will also serve on the Audit Committee; Kyle from the University Caucus and Maddy from USAS were also nominated to be on the Audit Committee. All board nominations were unanimously approved.

Executive Session

An executive session was held to discuss confidential financial and programmatic matters.

Executive Director's Report

Natchi – Scott Nova

Scott described an investigation at Natchi apparel that was launched in response to the murder of a worker by her former supervisor and related worker complaints about GBVH. He reviewed the extremely challenging and highly sensitive nature of the investigation, which documented systematic GBVH in the factory, identified a second murder, and found strong indication a third murder had occurred.

Scott reported that, partly in response to the WRC report, agreements have been reached between a factory union and allied groups, on the one hand, and buyers on the other, including H&M. Scott stated that he believes the agreements are strong enough to give workers the ability to protect themselves and alter the culture of the factory.

International Safety Accord – Scott Nova

Scott updated the board on the International Accord on Safety and Health in the Textile and Garment Industry, including the commitment, within the agreement, to expand the program beyond Bangladesh to at least one additional country. Scott explained that the Accord Steering Committee had agreed in principle, over the summer, to proceed with the creation of a program in Pakistan, but that the brands on the Steering Committee had since been reluctant to announce this decision or take steps toward implementation, making it unclear whether or not the brands really intended to go forward. Scott expected that once there was a public announcement, and a Pakistan agreement for brands to sign, most current Accord signatory brands that source from Pakistan would sign it. Scott added that the Pakistan expansion would make it more likely that a longer-term, international agreement would go forward as well, given that the current International Accord expires in late 2023. Scott discussed the importance of moving forward in Pakistan for collegiate licensing, noting that there are dozens of licensees sourcing from the country, at upwards of seventy factories, many of which likely have significant building safety hazards. He pointed out that, as with Bangladesh, the advent of an Accord program is by far the best way to bring the collegiate suppliers in the country up to minimum safety standards.

Agreements on GBVH in Lesotho – Rola Abimourched

Rola updated the board on the implementation of the agreements to combat gender-based violence and harassment in Lesotho, at factories owned by the Taiwanese jeans manufacturer Nien Hsing. She emphasized, in particular, the successful implementation of the complaint and investigation mechanism, with more than 50 investigations that were either completed or in process, with discipline directed by the independent assessor having been imposed on perpetrators in over 25 cases.

Hong Seng Knitting – Scott Nova

Scott updated the board on the case of Hong Seng Knitting, a factory in Thailand producing for Nike, which coerced workers into accepting unpaid leave, rather than pay the 70 percent of wages required under Thai law during periods of work suspension. Scott discussed Nike's continued refusal to acknowledge the bulk of the violations, leaving this large-scale wage theft unremedied.

Mex Mode – Ben Hensler

Ben briefly summarized the WRC’s freedom of association investigation at Mex Mode, a collegiate supplier. Ben reviewed the findings of violations of freedom of association, in the form of retaliation against a new union, Liga, which sought recognition. Ben noted that university licensees Lakeshirts and Fanatics had been responsive but had limited leverage because their production at Mex Mode had ceased prior to the investigation. Ben stated that, while Mex Mode has recognized the Liga union, it continues to interrogate workers who choose Liga as their union representation during grievance meetings and has refused to create a neutral ombudsperson to facilitate compliance.

Executive Session

An executive session was held to discuss confidential financial and programmatic matters.

Administrative Updates to Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws

Kyle made a motion to update the Certificate of Incorporation to reflect the WRC’s new office address. Julie F. seconded it; all board members voted in favor.

Jill made a motion to amend the bylaws to incorporate corrected language under Section 8.2. Craig seconded the motion. There were no objections or abstentions, all board members approved.

Agenda Adjustments

The board agreed to move the scheduled discussion on communications to another meeting.

Set Next Meeting Dates

Jess suggested that, for the two upcoming board meetings, one meeting could have a pre-meeting Thursday briefing, while the other could incorporate an opportunity for each of the board caucuses to meet separately with WRC staff. Angeles noted that the briefings are valuable, and also suggested considering onsite visits with other labor rights organizations (e.g. Garment Worker Center in LA). Jill noted that it would be useful to have caucus meetings for the Advisory Council. Shreya supported the idea of constituency meetings with staff.

The board informally approved Jess’s proposal for the winter and spring sessions. Jess said she would follow up with the board about specific caucus meetings.

The board agreed to hold its next two meetings on January 27, 2023, and April 21, 2023.

Update on Trax Apparel (Cambodia)

Rola provided an update on Trax Apparel, which the WRC found had illegally terminated leaders of an independent labor union. Rola explained that after including union leaders in a mass layoff, Trax later offered rehiring to the vast bulk of those laid off but refused to rehire any of the union leaders, an anomaly that could not plausibly be explained except by discriminatory targeting. Rola reported that after the WRC engaged with adidas, which makes collegiate goods at Trax, a mediation was held, but management only offered to reinstate half of the fired leaders and with only partial back pay. The union acceded to this, because management made it clear

that if the union did not, then it would rehire none of the leaders, an illegal position that rendered the resulting agreement invalid. Rola noted that Trax then isolated the four reinstated union leaders in a part of the factory separated from most of the workforce. Rola summarized several pieces of evidence within the investigation which demonstrated that Trax had engaged in freedom of association violations. Rola described the WRC's recommendations for remediation, which include reinstating three additional workers who wish to return; full back pay to all eight fired leaders; restoration of reinstated workers to their original work locations; and announcing and displaying a statement pledging to respect freedom of association. Despite further extensive engagement with adidas, adidas has refused to acknowledge the violations of Cambodian law and university labor codes, including attempts by the factory to bribe the union to abandon its demand for full reinstatement. Rola also noted that Trax has refused to supply evidence requested by the WRC and that adidas had not intervened to require Trax's cooperation.

Introduction of Board Members

In light of their being a number of newly elected board members, the meeting concluded with each of the board members introducing themselves and providing some of their background in higher education and/or labor rights work.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:03 p.m.