

Justice for Workers: Organizing for Sweatshop-Free Schools

Collegiate apparel is a huge industry, with people spending millions of dollars a year to wear their university colors and mascots. This may mean big bucks for companies, but why are their labor forces struggling under unacceptable, inhumane conditions and in nearly abject poverty? Take action to ensure that your university clothing store has a conscience!

Partnering Organizations and Contacts:

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Background Information

Over the past two decades, there has been a big shift among corporations towards outsourcing brands like Nike. Rather than manufacturing products “in-house,” the corporations delegate the responsibility of production to third party subcontractors. These subcontractors often oversee factories in developing nations where operating expenses can be kept extremely low via meager wages, lax government regulations, and trade laws favorable to developed nations.

Because there are not many job opportunities for unskilled female laborers in these nations, poor women overwhelmingly occupy these factory positions; currently, over 91% of sweatshop workers are women. Sweatshop conditions vary but may include extremely long hours (14-16 hours shifts), frequent overtime requirements with little or no compensation, mandatory on-site residency, no bathroom breaks, docked pay for any tardiness, sexual harassment, and stifling heat as a result of poor ventilation. There are other stories about managers forcing women to take pregnancy tests, or coercing them to get abortions so they do not lose workers. Many women are fired when they reach their late 20s and are considered “too old” to work. Unfortunately, when a company sets a standard of rock-bottom prices and treats its workers unfairly, other manufacturers feel that they must follow suit to slash their prices and stay competitive; this trend is becoming far too common and it has serious effects, such as pitting low-wage workers in developing nations against one another, while lowering the quality of life for all.

Because these exploitative corporations have a lot of money, power, and influence, it may seem impossible to challenge their business practices. However, students have made impressive strides since they began organizing on sweatshop issues in 1996, when major corporations like Nike and Reebok began signing exclusive contracts with college athletic departments. Student activists were apprehensive about the connection between their universities and the exploitative labor tactics of these companies; they pressured universities to adopt codes of conduct and compelled the collegiate apparel industry to adhere to them. As a result of this anti-sweatshop activism led by organizations like United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), a number of universities were forced to disregard corporate threats, break their contracts with major corporations, and concede to student demands to write up a code of conduct. More successes followed in 1999 when Nike and other companies agreed to publicly disclose their factory locations, the first

time that any company in the garment industry had conceded to this basic demand. Since then, students have been influential in several important labor fights, organizing in conjunction with factories around the world and conducting factory investigations to determine worker abuses. Students have also branched out to living wage and university employee solidarity campaigns. At every step of the way, students have met the challenges head-on.

Take Action to End Unfair Labor Practices Around the Globe !

Contact United Students Against Sweatshops for More Information

United Students Against Sweatshops or USAS (www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org) seeks to fight for workers' rights and advocates for sweatshop-free labor conditions. One of their primary campaigns is the "Sweat-Free Campus Campaign," where groups like yours can compel universities to adopt ethically and legally strong codes of conduct, promote transparency in terms of partner company practices, and advocate for independent monitoring by the Worker Rights Consortium (which insures the ability of workers to organize).

At the USAS website, you can **sign up to receive the USAS action alert emails** in order to know how to take action on urgent sweatshop situations. Visit their website and enter your email address in the "Join the USAS Network" heading. You can also **become a member of USAS and/or start an affiliate group of USAS on your campus**. Affiliate groups receive resources from their national office and have the ability to vote in elections. If your campus already has a USAS chapter, find out how you can get involved!

Because each university has distinctive policies, and each campus has a different experience in organizing, **it is important to get in touch with USAS before you take on an anti-sweatshop campaign on your campus**. They are the experts in strategizing and creating a unique approach for your group because they have helped others campuses to do the same.

Make Sure Your Campus is Sweat-Free

- **Research your university's licensing and purchasing structures and the companies involved.** Those most capable of answering licensing/purchasing questions are the licensing officer, licensing contact, or bookstore manager who can be found in your staff directory. School websites often have a webpage specific to the licensing operations which might give the licensing officer and/or buyer's contact information and policy explanations. Each affiliate group receives the USAS Campus Organizer Manual. Refer to this manual for a list of specific licensing policy questions to ask once you have contact information.
- **Encourage administrators to join the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC)** and to **adopt a code of conduct** which makes public the names and locations of factories which produce merchandise for the school as well as the working conditions in those factories. Disclosure helps to ensure that your school's apparel is made by workers who have safe and lawful working conditions.

- **Educate the campus and local community** about sweatshop abuses in general, your university's licensing/purchasing policies, the nationwide Sweat-Free Campaign, your group's specific involvement, and your school's obligation to have responsible licensing policies and to join the Worker Rights Consortium.
- **Host an Anti-Sweat Shop Fashion Show** at your university. All you need are 4-5 models and 1-2 announcers who will give details about where and by whom the clothes were made and the working conditions within that company and country. To get maximum exposure, make sure to hold the event in a central place on campus and remember to inform your local media. The USAS Campus Organizing Manual contains a detailed script for the fashion show which you can expand upon or create your own.