

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE DIALOGUE

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ADVANCING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE – UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES DO THEIR PART

“Stitched Up: The Human Cost of Cheap Clothing” is the title of a report issued July 27 by the **Workers Rights Consortium** (WRC), a non-profit membership organization that monitors the manufacturing of apparel and other branded merchandise [sold in member university shops]. WRC is focused on foreign “sweatshops,” and working conditions that violate its Model Codes of Conduct. WRC investigates allegations of abuse, and rates manufacturers and retailers on their practices. (Copy of WRC report is available on line. See endnotes.)

The Consortium is comprised of college and university administrators, students and labor rights experts who enforce WRC’s Model Codes of Conduct (as adopted by the schools) among licensees, especially companies in less developed nations. Especially important to WRC are conditions of workers involved in manufacturing of apparel and other merchandise in foreign factories busily churning out goods to be sold at retail in the more than 100 colleges signed up with WRC. Participating students are members of **United Students Against Sweatshops**.

The “Stitched Up” report focused on conditions in a Jakarta, Indonesia factory where workers reportedly toil 14 hours a day to turn out branded backpacks for **Adidas, Jansport** and other US consumer marketers. WRC points out that Jansport is but one brand of global **VF Corporation**, which also markets Wrangler and Lee Jeans, and outdoor clothing by Nautica, Eastpak and North Face. Chances are some of us will find one or more of these popular brands in our wardrobe.

For years, the WRC report claims, workers in this factory suffered intolerable conditions (such as forced overtime, substandard wages, dangerous conditions). Last year the WRC pressured the factory owners, and changes were made – temporarily, it turns out. The factory is about to close.

Demonstrating the complexity of global trade issues, the plant near the Indonesian capital is owned by a Korean company – the Dae Joo Corporation – and is shutting down, it appears to the report authors, as a result of the heightened oversight and demands for reforms made by US buyers (the college retailers in the Consortium). Manufacturing will soon be switched to a less transparent operating environment: China. Turns out Dae Joo has a plant there.

Dae Joo has become the poster child for anti-sweat shop campaigners in the US and other countries who accuse the firm of avoiding the cost of implementing decent worker conditions. Two main US customers are also in the spotlight: Adidas and Jansport. (Adidas just cut ties to Dae Joo. Jansport indicates it may soon follow.)

Earlier, giant shoe marketer **Nike** had been the target of US activists protesting alleged use of child labor and sweatshop operations to turn out Nike-branded goods to be marketed in the United States. Nike has since made improvements in its sourcing practices and policies, and appointed a director of global issues management to deal with these and other issues.

Hundreds of Indonesia factories have closed, says the WRC, and the story is being repeated elsewhere in less developed nations, as low-wage workers and manufacturers lose out to even lower-wage and apparently less regulated Chinese factories. Soon the world’s garment industry could be dominated by China and at least one million low-wage jobs will disappear in Indonesia and poverty-stricken Bangladesh, says WRC. (Comments **Neil Kearney**, general secretary of the **International Textile, Garment and Leather Worker’s Federation**: “China has the capacity to clothe virtually the whole world; its textile industry is like a tap that is about to be turned on to full strength.”)

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***Advancing Social and Economic Justice
– Universities and Colleges Do Their Part
(continued)***

Meanwhile, the flow of backpacks from East Asian factories to American store floors and catalogues continues. Activists in the college retail shop community are determined to do something about working conditions in the less-developed world through the Workers Rights Consortium. Their investigations – and the just-released report – are examples of WRC actions.

Representatives of major US universities such as **Ohio State, University of Iowa, Duke and Georgetown** comprise the WRC governing board. Independent labor rights experts on the advisory council come from **Columbia Law School, the AFL-CIO, People of Faith Network** (headed by **Rev. David Dyson, of Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn NY**). **United Students Against Sweatshops** representatives come from **Loyola University, SUNY Buffalo, University of Chicago, Georgetown University** and other schools.

The Consortium's Code of Conduct for member schools are standards and practices acceptable to the schools and to be required of licensees who produce apparel and merchandise bearing the school's or brand marketer's name (sweat suits, T Shirts, book bags, etc.); these address:

- Wages and Benefits for Workers
- Working Hours (48 hours or the limits in each country, and one day off in seven)
- Overtime Compensation (1 ½ times hourly wage)
- Child Labor (no one employed under age 14 or 15, depending on country)
- No Forced Labor (it is alleged that some Chinese factories use forced labor)
- Health and Safety (employers must ensure a safe and healthy working environment)
- Non-discrimination policies (gender, race, religion, age, disability, nationality, ethnic origin)
- Non Harassment or Abuse Policies in the plants
- Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining
- Women's Rights (equal pay, benefits, promotions)

On Wages and Benefits – Licensees (manufacturers and retailers) must agree to pay a "living wage" that provides

for housing, energy, nutrition, clothing, health care, education, potable water, child care, transportation, and savings of an average family unit in the country. The Consortium's governing board has investigative mechanisms to check on compliance with the Model Code of Conduct by suppliers.

Complicating this type of US social and economic justice activism: Under international agreements, country quotas will vanish altogether as **World Trade Organization (WTO)** standards go into effect. Apparel and shoe manufacturing in the United States has already pretty much disappeared, along with literally hundreds of thousands of jobs paying living wages. Such is the brave new world of outsourcing. One question raised in this country: Is the trade-off worth it? (That is, having lower priced goods available in our Riverhead stores at the cost of Americans losing their jobs in manufacturing to overseas firms.)

Unfortunately for countries like Indonesia – attempting to lift up worker standards – the availability of other manufacturing venues (such as China), with much lower or non-existent workers' rights, are destroying the progress made to date.

YOU CAN LEARN MORE AT:

www.workersrights.org

(for information about the Workers Rights Consortium)

www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/09/24/1032734163405.html

(for news on Rev. Dyson)

This information is provided by Old Steeple Community Church of Aquebogue, New York (11931), United Church of Christ, founded 1750 and today serving a farming and semi-suburban community on Long Island's North Fork.

The dialogue is intended to help further understanding of current events and trends in social and economic justice, and in corporate social responsibility.

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