

PERSPECTIVES

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Cracking the Codes

Members of the Human Rights Alliance urge the University to adopt its own corporate code of conduct



Imagine you are one of 8,000 employees at a factory where you work 11 hours a day plus mandatory overtime. You are stuck in an overheated factory and are forbidden to speak to co-workers.

Imagine that you are paid less than minimum wage. Imagine that you are only 13, your lungs already brittle and cloudy from breathing the factory air. This may seem far removed from your daily life, but we as students and consumers are supporting these conditions. When we buy a University T-shirt made by companies like Champion, Jansport or Nike from the University Bookstore, do we realize what labor abuses we facilitate?

The companies assure us that their factories are not sweatshops. Nike claims that it abides by all labor laws of the countries where its factories are located. It also boasts its Nike Code of Conduct "ensures" fair labor practices.

But independent organizations that monitor its factories tell us otherwise. Consider this 1997 study conducted by two Asian non-governmental organizations of a Nike factory in China.

These groups documented a shocking list of labor abuses that violated both Chinese labor laws and the Nike Code of Conduct that included, in addition to those mentioned above, the following: only two to four days off work per month, women fired if they became pregnant and workers not informed of the Code of Conduct.

Clearly, the conduct of companies like Nike is unacceptable. While company codes of conduct may exist, they are not enforced.

And that's where we come in. As University students, we can refuse to permit our University clothing to be made in sweatshops, and we can join the numerous universities nationwide that have put an end to supporting such abuses.

Currently, students are urging our administration to co-author a licensing code of conduct that would establish and enforce socially responsible workplace standards for companies that we license our trademark to. University administrators' greatest concern is that a licensing code be enforceable, and they have suggested that the University would need to join a larger affiliation.

The only external body that currently exists for monitoring and enforcing is the Fair Labor Association. The FLA is composed of both apparel companies, including

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Nike, Liz Claiborne and Phillips-Van Heusen, and human-rights organizations, including the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. All labor organizations that participated in the early stages of FLA development withdrew due to concerns that the charter had become merely a public relations move by the companies involved.

As the labor organizations realized, the FLA establishes neither adequate workplace standards nor sufficient monitoring practices. For example, companies not only choose their own monitors, and not only are just 5 percent of their factories monitored each year, but the companies may choose which factories monitors visit.

Additionally, there is a real question as to whether the member companies of the FLA are acting in good faith. This past winter, Phillips-Van Heusen shut down its only unionized factory in Central America. This closure is in blatant disregard to the company's good faith participation in the FLA.

The University now has the opportunity to create social change through the enactment of a licensing code of conduct that is both strong and enforceable. We have the responsibility to ensure that workers manufacturing University apparel have safe workplace conditions, a living wage and the right to organize.

The University has the resources to commit to researching enforcement plans and evaluating pilot monitoring programs. After all, the long-term goal of the anti-sweatshop movement is not to establish an external monitoring system by which consumers are always looking over the shoulders of factory owners.

Rather, it is to ensure that workers in these factories are educated and empowered enough that they will have influence over their own workplace conditions. This is the sort of long-term solution that we, as a university, could have a hand in creating.

The most immediate pro-active step that the University can take is to demand full disclosure of its licensees, even before a University code of conduct is completed. Knowing the site of factory locations will permit us to determine the extent of the problem and will also give us the information to determine appropriate means for monitoring and enforcement.

Moreover, full public disclosure gives us the knowledge to be informed consumers. Everyone deserves healthy and humane working conditions, from our GTFs to workers producing University apparel.

Kyla Schuller and Sarah Jacobson are members of the Human Rights Alliance. University administrator Duncan McDonald was also offered the opportunity to write a guest editorial on the same topic, but he declined the offer.

