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# Nike stands its ground on WRC; adidas, Reebok seemingly tolerant

■ While other apparel companies may not be as outspokenly critical toward the WRC, critiques say, in general, meeting labor standards is an industry-wide problem

By Jack Clifford  
Oregon Daily Emerald

The contentious war of words between apparel companies that have licensing agreements with universities and the various schools' opposition groups to such arrangements has recently escalated across the country.

Nike has attracted some of the harshest criticism directed at its alleged unfair labor practices. Other apparel companies, such as adidas and Reebok, have been background players to this point, but the issue of partnerships between universities and the Worker Rights Consortium is being closely watched and debated.

On Thursday, Nike ended negotiations with the University of Michigan — another school in partnership with the WRC.

Nike's move was perhaps too drastic, adidas public relations manager Travis Gonzolez said. The sport-apparel company has a contract with Notre Dame, another big-name school considering WRC membership.

"I think we'll take everything case by case," Gonzolez said, adding that adidas wouldn't feel a need to pull support from Notre Dame if it joined. "That response is a little strong," he said.

Although the spotlight has been on Nike's labor issues and its recent licensing actions, a spokesman for the United Students Against Sweatshops, a Washington, D.C.-based organization, said apparel companies in general are not meeting acceptable labor standards.

"There might be some minimal differences between the companies, but this is an industry-wide problem," said Eric Brakken, a USAS organizer. "It's the way that these companies are using the global economy to increase their

power over foreign workers."

As the industry's perceived leader, Nike is just the most visible target, but labor-monitoring organizations such as the WRC are needed, he said, to keep watch over the entire lot.

One main complaint Knight made when announcing his decision to end his financial relationship with the University is the WRC's refusal to allow corporate representation on its board, a point discussed in Friday's meeting in Chicago between university administrators and the WRC.

Gonzolez, a University graduate, said adidas would like to be informed of the group's actions and decisions, but he said conversations should end there.

"It wouldn't be our right to go in and say we want to be on [the WRC's] board," he said.

Another constant sticking point between apparel companies and their critics has been the disclosure of overseas factory locations. A sample search of the Nike's and Reebok's Web sites turned up a list of 22 factory locations for the former and 10 locations for the latter; other apparel companies, such as Jansport and Russell Athletic, also post locations for its overseas manufacturing facilities.

"We applaud anyone's efforts to improve factories and the working conditions at those factories. That's why we publish our locations," said Denise Kaigler, senior director of communications at Reebok. She refused, however, to address Brakken's specific comments about how all apparel companies contribute to the "industry-wide problem."

Reebok came under fire in 1996 when it added a clause to its contract with the University of Wisconsin that stated university faculty and staff members were not to

issue any statements that disparaged Reebok or anything associated with the company.

The clause was eventually deleted, but Julia Fox, a University sociology instructor, said the instance is just one of the expectations apparel companies have when entering licensing contracts with schools.

"All of this is an indication of [apparel companies'] wanting to control the purse strings — they want to make sure their investments are safe investments," she said.

Fox also said she believes that companies are only setting easily attainable benchmarks in relation to worker rights issues.

"Certainly the rules of the game in the global market are changing such that these large companies can set the standards in such a low way. Of course they're within the standards of those foreign countries."

Using compensation as one example, Gonzolez said adidas looks at each specific country's standard.

"We expect people to be paid in a foreign economy to be on the same scale [as the United States]," he said. "Taking such a broad stroke doesn't work, however."

The debate at the University regarding Knight and Nike's recent actions doesn't seem to be losing its intensity, with local and state newspapers devoting entire pages to community feedback.

Brakken and Fox said student groups and grassroots organizations need to maintain a strong voice.

Gonzolez said his perception is that no matter how far apparel companies move forward in improving labor standards, certain groups will always be dissatisfied.

"You can't satisfy everyone, [so] you have to satisfy the majority," he said. "Our basic standard codes of conduct are what any reasonable person would consider right or wrong, and we abide by that."

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