

Great debate: WRC vs. FLA

Students, University officials and staff members have differing views on the labor monitoring groups

By Ben Romano
Oregon Daily Emerald

The Fair Labor Association and the Worker Rights Consortium have a similar goal: ending labor abuses in overseas factories. But that's where the similarities end, because the two labor monitoring organizations have substantive differences.

President Dave Frohnmayer added the University to the FLA's roster on Tuesday, making it one of 15 schools in the country that belong to both the FLA and the WRC.

For many student activists, the differences between the two are crucial. They say the FLA is "fundamentally flawed," because it has apparel industry representatives on its board of directors. Students have pressured the president to keep the University out of the FLA.

The students support the WRC, which has vowed to maintain independence from the industry it seeks to monitor. Meanwhile, University administrators have been some of the most vocal critics of the WRC, according to WRC staff members.

Frohnmayer contends that the choice between the FLA and the WRC is a "subsidiary issue." More important, he said, is maintaining the momentum of achieving the monitoring conditions in factories where merchandise bearing the University logo is manufactured.

Sam Brown, the FLA's executive director, said the organization will begin factory inspections this fall.

Students contend that the monitoring the FLA will do is hollow. They liken it to having "the fox guarding the hen house."

"There were a series of problems with the FLA that have not been addressed," said Halle Rubin Williams, a history major who has been involved with the issue for a year and a half.

Williams said the apparel companies are allowed to select which factories are monitored, factory inspections are announced ahead of time and companies are allowed to choose a monitoring agency.

"I think that really covers up what's going on in the apparel industry rather than uncovering it," she said.

Brown said he has heard these complaints before and they often result from misreading the FLA's policies and protocols.

Apparel companies provide the FLA with a preliminary list of factories they think should be monitored based on three criteria: factory size, location and history of abuse. The FLA's executive director then reviews the submitted lists and makes the final decision on what factories will be monitored.

"It gives us a starting point ... but I control what ends up on the list," Brown said. "If I get a whole list of factories in Ohio, I'm going to be pretty skeptical."

Brown said that some factory inspections are announced, but others will be surprise visits. He said larger factories that would have to spend millions of dollars to clean up air quality, for example, would not be able to do so just for the day of an announced visit. Also, factory monitors must have the cooperation of factory management to gain access to records, such as payrolls.

The FLA is still working out the details of who will do the monitoring. It has received applications

from private and non-profit corporations, non-government organizations and religious groups, all of which are interested in monitoring factories. When factory monitors have been accredited, the apparel companies will choose which monitors will inspect the factories that produce their brands, Brown said.

He added that the factory's interest is not always the interest of the brand.

"The factory may be doing things that the brand doesn't want to be identified with," Brown said. "Students who assume that the brands are necessarily complicit in that are frequently wrong."

Frohnmayer said a University Senate committee that reviewed the FLA before he made the decision to join concluded that student complaints about the organization had been addressed.

Still, student activists favor the WRC because of its independence and grass-roots, student-founded nature. But administrators find flaws with the WRC.

In a letter announcing the University's intention to join the WRC in April, Frohnmayer identified specific concerns he had with the organization: The WRC lacked proper university representation on its board of directors; the absence of apparel industry representation made it unbalanced; its insistence on closed meetings flew in the face of Oregon's open meetings laws, which Frohnmayer helped create as state attorney general. He has since expressed concerns with the WRC's current financial picture.

He acknowledges that some changes have been made in the organization, but, he added, "we have to wait and see if these changes will address our concerns."

The WRC has made concessions. For example, at its first national meeting in July, the organization allowed university representatives to hold five seats on the WRC board of directors instead of three.

However, Maria Roeper, a WRC staff member, said the organization intends to keep meetings closed to the media, though board minutes will be posted on its Web page.

Responding to criticism of the WRC's financial situation, Roeper said she is "totally comfortable" with the WRC's finances. The organization, which estimated its budget for the coming year to be \$295,000, is in the process of applying for non-profit status.

While other schools have voiced concerns about the lack of industry representation in the WRC board, the University is clearly the loudest voice, Roeper said.

"Some schools absolutely don't want to see [industry representation]," she said. "The WRC is supposed to be an independent organization that's investigating working conditions. We're not going to have [the apparel industry] involved in investigating themselves and their own practices — that defeats the purpose."

Roeper said the WRC plans to have meetings with the apparel industry when the organization hires an executive director. But, she added, "we don't intend to have industry making decisions."

Roeper acknowledged that there are still issues to be ironed out, but noted that the organization is still in the early stages of development.

"It's the first year, people tend to forget that," Roeper said. She said the organization is still determining how factory monitoring will be done, for example.

"We will be investigating through three primary mechanisms," she said. The WRC plans to gather information from the apparel industry, compile complaints from workers and conduct

Quick facts

The Fair Labor Association

... grew from the Apparel Industry Partnership, a group of manufacturers, human rights groups and universities that the White House brought together to address sweatshop labor issues.

... has a 14-member board. Six board members represent industry and one represents universities.

The WRC

... evolved from the United Students Against Sweatshops, a coalition devoted to stopping sweatshop labor.

... has no apparel industry representation on its 15-member board. University representatives hold five seats.

SOURCE: www.fairlabor.org
www.workersrights.org

"proactive investigations."

Once those mechanisms are in place, "that's when you can start thinking about doing pilot projects," Roeper said.

Monitoring a major issue

All sides agree that the FLA is much closer than the WRC to actually monitoring factories.

"The question of who's more immediately prepared to do monitoring and the level of monitoring is fundamental," said Oregon State Senator Tony Corcoran, representative from rural Lane and Douglas counties. "It's a little bit unfair to criticize the WRC for not being prepared to go ahead with full-scale monitoring, whereas the FLA has the proceeds of several multinational corporations to go ahead with their vision."

Frohnmayer said the decision to join the FLA was not a criticism of the WRC, but that he wanted to achieve the goals of monitoring factories as soon as possible.

Corcoran said the University's membership in both monitoring agencies is a positive thing.

"I'm not convinced that the interests of the workers that we're concerned about here aren't in fact benefited by the U of O having a dual membership," he said. It draws continued attention to the issue of world trade and "appropriate conduct in the context of world trade," he added.

The only other school in the Pacific-10 Conference to hold dual membership in both monitoring groups is the University of Arizona. Students there have expressed concerns about the FLA and met with President Peter Likins Friday afternoon to encourage him to sever the school's ties with the FLA.

Other universities have also signed with both groups, such as Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., which joined the FLA before joining the WRC. Henrik Dullea, vice-president for university relations, said Cornell participates in both organizations because "we think the FLA is a very strong organization that has made strong progress," and "our students are very involved and active in Students Against Sweatshops and the formation of the WRC."

Dullea said Cornell rejected the notion that a school must choose one organization or the other.

Brown, the FLA executive director, is less optimistic about the existence of two monitoring groups.

"The debate between the FLA and WRC frankly wastes a lot of time," Brown said. "We approach it in very different ways, but I think they're bound to fail in the long run."

The WRC doesn't have an official position on the FLA, but Roeper acknowledged that comparisons between the two do matter.

"We are operating in a fish bowl," she said. "However, I don't spend my time trying to fight the FLA. I'm trying to develop [the WRC] into a good, successful organization."

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