

UC joins efforts against sweatshops

After students protest, university system agrees to plan ensuring that logo apparel companies don't have poor labor practices

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After student protests and arrests, the University of California has agreed to participate in a program that aims to ensure that UC does not contract with companies using sweatshops to produce school logo apparel.

The decision Friday follows UC student demonstrations -- including one in Berkeley where protesters stood naked -- protesting the university's alleged contracts with clothing companies that have poor labor practices.

UC President Robert Dynes issued a statement outlining how the UC system will take part in the Designated Suppliers Program, a plan developed by a nationwide movement called United Students Against Sweatshops.

UC will require companies doing business with the system to purchase at least 25 percent of logo apparel from factories that pay living wages, respect unions or other representative organizations, and primarily sell products to other university licensees or companies with comparable practices, according to the statement.

"It's going to require a significant change in how our licensees do business," said UC spokesman Noel Van Nyhuis. "There's a lot of details that need to be worked out in order for this to work."

UC will adopt the program for at least a year. A code of conduct committee for trademark licensing already exists, Van Nyhuis said.

The program is meant to enhance the enforcement of codes of conduct, according to the United Students Web site.

The problem was that "the licensees were not abiding" by the codes in place, said Nina Rizzo, a UC Berkeley senior and lead organizer for the UC Sweat-Free campaign at Berkeley.

Protest leaders scheduled two meetings with Dynes during the academic year, but both were canceled. The organizers said they were never able to speak directly to the president.

"It's hard to say" whether student protests influenced Dynes' decision, Van Nyhuis said. "Certainly they were hard to ignore on some occasions."

The naked protest in early March on the Berkeley campus provided some visibility to the cause. Eighteen UC students were arrested in mid-April after a sit-in at Chancellor Robert Birgeneau's office. Ten students were arrested during a similar protest at UC Riverside on the same day, said Zack Knorr, a student and a United Students regional organizer.

"I think the protests did have quite an effect on winning this campaign," Rizzo said.

Other UC schools held protest actions, but Riverside and Berkeley were "the two main hubs," Rizzo said.

The UC system joins about 20 other universities that have issued statements concerning the adoption of the program, according to the United Students Web site. They include Santa Clara University, Columbia University and the University of Colorado at Boulder.

"I'm just very glad that they were able to come to a decision before the end of the school year," Rizzo said. "It gives me a lot of pride in the University of California now."

Jessica Rutter, national organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops, said the group is hoping enforcement will begin in November.

The organization is gathering a "critical mass" of colleges and universities willing to adopt the program so the major licensees like Nike, Adidas and Reebok will agree to program standards. Recruiting larger schools that generate high licensing revenues is key, Rutter said.

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