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Russell Athletic shifts course on Honduran workers after pressure from anti-sweatshop groups

ALAN SCHER ZAGIER
Associated Press Writer
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After widespread and prolonged student protests at U.S. universities, sports apparel maker Russell Athletic says it will open a new factory in Honduras and rehire ousted union workers as part of an agreement with a group that monitors labor conditions abroad for colleges.

Student pressure over concerns about Russell Athletic's labor practices had prompted nearly 100 colleges and universities to drop licensing deals with the company that allowed it to print

clothing with colleges' names, logos and mascots.

"This is huge," said Jack Mahoney, a recent Georgetown University graduate and organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops. "We've had a number of smaller victories, but this is the first time we know of that somebody has reversed a company's decision."

The factory will reopen in Choloma and be called Jerzees Nuevo Dia, which means "new day" in Spanish. The Atlanta-based clothing maker has agreed to rehire 1,200 former workers and abide by collective bargaining agreements at all of its Honduran factories.

The moves are part of an agreement dated Nov. 14 between Russell Athletic and the Worker Rights Consortium. A spokesman for Russell and its parent company, Fruit of the Loom Inc., said the company "looks forward" to enacting the pact, which was released publicly this week.

The agreement is "intended to foster workers rights in Honduras and establish a harmonious and cooperative labor-management relationship," the announcement reads.

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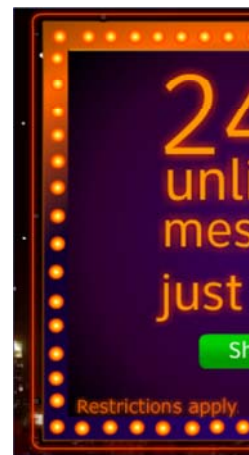
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Russell had previously said it closed the factory in October 2008 due to falling demand for the fleece sewn there. The company said it picked the union plant in Choloma because it had a month-to-month lease and cost \$2 million less to close than the non-union alternative.

Columbia University was among the schools that dropped its licensing agreement with Russell in response to student activists. A school official said the company's shift will prompt Columbia to reconsider its decision.

"This was a great step in the right direction," said Honey Sue Fishman, executive director of business services.

The Worker Rights Consortium, a group that monitors labor conditions abroad for colleges, has said Russell spent two years trying to intimidate workers who tried to unionize before closing the factory.

The consortium's executive director, Scott Nova, called Russell's reversal a "gigantic breakthrough for labor rights in the region." He expects the move to have a ripple effect for labor relations in Honduras and other countries where American companies locate manufacturing plants.

"It's a toehold that people have been trying to get for a decade," he said.

College students first began protesting working conditions at overseas garment factories in the late 1990s, saying the schools had a moral obligation to closely monitor how T-shirts and other sports wear with athletic logos were made.

At some schools, including the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, students held sit-ins outside administrative offices.

On the Net:

<http://www.russellathletic.com>

(This version CORRECTS Corrects name of group to Worker Rights Consortium sted Workers Rights Consortium)

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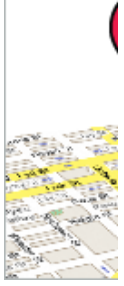
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