

-Eric Davis-

Year of Strides for Workers' Rights

One year ago, the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a partnership of student anti-sweatshop activists, college and university administrators, and labor and human rights experts, held its founding conference in New York. The objective of the WRC was to improve working conditions for those engaged in the production of college and university logo apparel, primarily in Mexico, Central America and Southeast Asia. I led Middlebury's delegation to the WRC's founding conference, along with Bob Santry, manager of the College store, Cori Loew '02 of the Middlebury Anti-Sweatshop Coalition and Nicole Miller '01, then the news editor of *The Middlebury Campus*.

I was elected a member of the WRC's governing board last spring, and served on the board and a number of its committees through the fall of 2000. I have continued to follow the work of the WRC closely, and in late March I attended the organization's most recent governing board meeting in Washington, D.C.

I am pleased to report that the WRC has made substantial progress over the past year in both organizational and programmatic terms. The group that a year ago was made up of representatives of about 40 colleges and universities today has 75 institutional affiliates and a solid organizational structure, and has started a program of investigations into working conditions at factories in the producing regions.

The WRC board has approved the organization's by-laws, and a governance structure is in place, based on equal repre-

sentation of each of the three constituencies: students, colleges and universities, and the advisory board of labor and human rights experts. The WRC's charter as a non-profit organization has been approved by the state of New York, and an application for tax-exempt status is now pending before the Internal Revenue Service and should be approved within the next two months. At last month's meeting, the board approved general principles for launching and conducting factory investigations and for remediation of working conditions.

The colleges and universities have organized their own caucus to elect board members and to discuss items on the WRC's agenda. The caucus has been effective in communicating the concerns of the institutional affiliates to the other members of the board and the WRC staff. The WRC's first executive director, Scott Nova, began working for the organization last December. Mr. Nova comes to the WRC with extensive experience in Washington, in the political, labor and human rights communities. He has many contacts on Capitol Hill and in the agencies, in the D.C. non-profit sector and in the press; he has done a good job of organization-building in his first few months in office. The WRC is in the process of hiring a professional staff and securing office space on a multi-year lease, and an active fund-raising program is in place. The organization expects to receive more than \$100,000 in grants from private foundations and government agencies in the current fiscal year, along with over \$200,000 in dues revenue from affiliated col-

leges and universities.

In order to maintain its non-profit and tax-exempt status, the WRC will not engage in either legislative lobbying or involvement in political campaigns. Additionally, the organization has adopted a "non-disparagement" policy toward the Fair Labor Association (FLA), another organization working on anti-sweatshop activities. Although the FLA has been criticized for having too much of an apparel industry presence in its governance structure, Mr. Nova believes that it is possible for the WRC to work constructively with the FLA on common concerns.

The WRC's most significant accomplishment in recent months was its investigation of working conditions at a factory in Atlixco, Mexico, owned by the South Korean company Kukdong International and used by Nike and Reebok for the manufacture of collegiate apparel. In response to complaints about working conditions at the Kukdong factory, a WRC delegation spent three days in Mexico in January conducting an on-site investigation. The delegation concluded that child labor was extensively used at the factory - children between 13 and 15 were working for up to 10 hours a day - that there was physical abuse of workers, that women were being denied maternity leave and that workers became sick after eating rancid food served in the factory cafeteria. Furthermore, in early January, Kukdong fired five supervisors who were leaders of a movement to replace the existing union at the factory with a labor organization independent of

the management, after which hundreds of the workers went on strike in support of the fired supervisors.

After releasing the report of its investigative team, WRC worked with Nike and Reebok

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in a process of constructive engagement to get the apparel manufacturers to put pressure on Kukdong to improve working conditions at the plant. In particular, WRC has effectively used the publicity resulting from the investigation to encourage Nike and Reebok to support the reinstatement of the fired supervisors and to see that the workers have the opportunity to choose their union

representatives in an election free of intimidation and coercion. WRC's investigation at Kukdong, and the follow-up work with the apparel manufacturers, have been the subject of favorable press coverage in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Financial Times*, as well as the Mexican daily *La Reforma*.

Over the past year, WRC has

responded to many of the concerns raised by colleges and universities at the time of the found-

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ing conference: the governance structure allows institutional affil-

iates a major voice in setting the organization's policies and priorities; non-profit and tax-exempt status, with the corollary restrictions on legislative and political activities, have been approved or are pending; an experienced executive director and professional staff have been appointed; foundation and government agency support is being raised

along with college and university dues; and Kukdong is a model for investigative and follow-up activity that resulted in improvement of working conditions for those manufacturing collegiate apparel. With a larger number of institutions joining the organization, as well as favorable press comment on the Kukdong project, WRC has a promising future ahead of it.

Eric L. Davis is Secretary of the College.