



PSU affiliates with second sweatshop ethics group

The decision to partner with the licensed apparel producer was encouraged by the Penn State chapter of United Students Against Sweatshops.

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Penn State recently became the final school in the Big Ten to affiliate with the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an organization responsible for monitoring the collegiate apparel industry.

As the 14th largest producer of licensed university apparel in the country, labor rights activists said the affiliation is an important first step for Penn State, but more steps need to be made.

Penn State spokesman Bill Mahon said the decision to affiliate with WRC came after Penn saw the growth in the organization.

"In the beginning they were just a one-person shop, but they've really professionalized themselves," he said. "They've grown as an organization and have staff around the world."

The Jan. 25 decision to affiliate with the WRC was prompted by a proposal the Penn State chapter of United Students Against Sweatshops submitted to the administration.

However, Theresa Haas, president of United Students Against Sweatshops, said Penn State will also remain affiliated with the Fair Labor Association (FLA), another monitoring organization.

"The FLA is run both administratively and financially by corporations, so their bottom line concern is profit. We see that as a conflict of interest," Haas said. "The WRC, on the other hand, is totally independent of the industry and made up of universities, unions and the likes."

Mahon said Penn State's union with both the WRC and FLA shows empathy toward both sides of the sweatshop issue.

Although it is now affiliated with the WRC, Penn State will continue to enforce the FLA's code of conduct, Haas said.

"Each organization has its own code of conduct, which is a set of rules concerning overtime, women's rights, child labor and other important issues," Haas said. "Penn State has not adopted the WRC's code of conduct, which has much stricter rules in almost every category than the FLA's code."

Mahon said the university is looking into adopting the WRC's code of conduct, but nothing has been decided yet.

Elisabet Eppes, member of the United Students Against Sweatshops, said that as part of the WRC, Penn State now has access to information regarding the location of the factories producing Penn State's apparel. This is important because the university needs to pull out of any factories operating against the WRC's code of conduct, she said.

Eppes added that the WRC is flawed because it is based on a complaint-filing system.

"This is a problem because workers don't always know their rights, so they don't realize they're being violated," Eppes said. "Also, workers may be afraid to speak up because they do not want to lose their jobs."

Haas said the WRC supports the Designated Supplier Program, which mandates that schools support only factories that pay their employees a living wage and offer a union. Penn State does not yet support or implement the program.

"Our focus now is to gain support for the Designated Supplier Program, rather than convince Penn State to adopt the WRC's code of conduct," Eppes said. "That way, we are dealing with factories that already have proper codes in place, rather than factories that still need to adopt better codes."

Zach Scheid, co-founder of the Student Labor Action Project (SLAP), said the Designated Supplier Program is a way to ensure that the factories producing apparel are operated ethically.

Forrest Briscoe, an assistant professor of labor studies and industrial relations (LSIR) and sociology, said Penn State's affiliation with the WRC may only be a half step in the right direction.

"There's no one solution with these things. We need more voluntary industry efforts, and we need some more government regulation, which may come in the future," Briscoe said. "Penn State is one of the biggest buyers in the branded athletic apparel industry, so we're kind of in a leadership position. But it seems like we are behind the times."

<http://www.collegian.psu.edu/archive/2006/02/02-14-06tdc/02-14-06dnews-09.asp>