

## Students protest foreign sweatshops

'Sleep-ins' now targeting U.S. department stores

Last updated June 18, 2007 11:43 p.m. PT

By **AMY ROLPH**  
P-I REPORTER

Soon, those sweat shirts with the UW logo stitched on the front will be available guilt-free.

Harkening back to the early days of the anti-apartheid movement, students at the University of Washington and college campuses across the country are protesting against overseas sweatshops and the U.S. companies trading with them.

The fair-labor mercenaries have taken aim close to home -- college apparel, most of which is churned out by Third World garment factories -- and notched a string of victories.

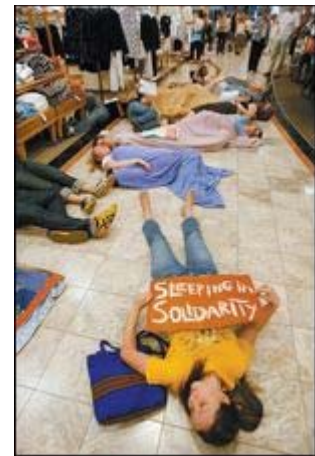
Earlier this month, Seattle University joined about 40 universities in committing to a "designated suppliers program" that requires companies producing the apparel sold on campus to establish long-term relationships with garment factories so workers can be guaranteed a "living wage."

Western Washington University committed to the program in April; the UW followed suit in May. The schools' decisions were motivated largely by at least a year of meetings and protests at the universities.

"Basically, students have a unique power in that they are members of the university community," said Rod Palmquist, a UW student who was detained by Westlake Center security at an anti-sweatshop protest downtown earlier this month. "They have this unique link to try and make an impact on factory conditions."

Fair-labor campaigns are going on at about 50 to 60 campuses around the country, said Zach Knorr, national organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops, based in Washington, D.C.

"Universities in theory are not businesses," he said. "They're supposed to hold themselves to a higher standard."



Paul Joseph Brown /P-I

Students from several human rights groups at the UW and Seattle University stage a "sleep-in" at Macy's in Seattle on June 2. They accused the department store chain of a lack of support for union labor at clothing production facilities in Guatemala. In the foreground is University of Washington student Khavija Reinhardt.

Salvadoran garment factories, for example, commonly pay workers 85 cents an hour -- a fraction of the \$2.52-an-hour wage it would take to help lift them out of poverty, according to the Worker Rights Consortium, the labor-rights group that sponsors the suppliers program.

It's too soon to say if higher overseas wages will translate into higher apparel prices at university bookstores and clothing stores. But those pushing the agreements say that the products are typically sold at inflated prices and that big companies such as Nike and Adidas can easily stomach an estimated loss of 1 to 3 percent of a garment's final value.

Doubling the wages of workers in the Dominican Republic would probably translate into a price increase of only 1.27 percent for an embroidered logo sweat shirt, according to data compiled by the Workers Rights group.

But not everyone is convinced the consortium's model will work.

With 800,000 workers in the company's supply chain, Beaverton, Ore.-based Nike has to strive for realistic systemic change without favoring a small group of workers over the rest, spokeswoman Erin Dobson said.

Nike supports the goals of the fair-labor campaign, but Dobson said: "We're just not convinced that all of the right questions have been asked and answered." Even the Fair Labor Association based in Washington, D.C., is skeptical that brands could realistically adhere to a long-term plan, since market demands often fluctuate.

"It does require long-term commitment to supplier, which is very difficult for companies to make," said Aret van Heerden, the association's president. "A company like Adidas doesn't know what its market is going to be demanding in a year."

It's that kind of indecision that students are trying to combat by talking to school administrators and -- when necessary -- falling back on the tried-and-true art of public demonstrations.

<b>COST OF LABOR</b>		
Student activists argue that the cost of labor is such a small portion of retail clothing costs that brands should be able to pay factory workers more.		
	<b>KNIT SHIRT*</b>	<b>EMBROIDERED SWEAT SHIRT**</b>
<b>Non-labor cost of production</b> Includes fabric, factory overhead and profit	\$7.31	\$5.89
<b>Labor cost of production</b>	<del>\$0.69</del>	<del>\$0.45</del>
<b>Price at factory door</b>	\$8.00	\$6.34
<b>Price after shipping</b> Includes shipping, duty, delivery, insurance, customs clearance	\$10.00	\$7.89
<b>Wholesale price</b>	\$20.00	\$15.78
<b>Retail price</b>	<del>\$44.00</del>	<del>\$35.00</del>
<b>Labor as percent of retail price</b>	1.56%	1.29%

\* Manufactured in the Philippines      \*\* Manufactured in the Dominican Republic  
 Source: Paul Gill, Golden Mountain Apparel, Workers Rights Consortium      SOURCE P-1

## Department store sleep-in

Students from the UW and Seattle University recently took a stand by lying down.

On June 2, they marched into the Westlake Center Macy's, spread blankets, sprawled out on the floor and closed their eyes.

Three of the 15 protesters -- including Palmquist -- were detained by mall security during the "sleep-in" in the department store's Liz Claiborne and Charter Club section -- part of a larger downtown demonstration.

"I think we're banned from all Macy's for a year," said Palmquist, who is involved with UW's anti-sweatshop group, the Student Labor Action Project.

The protest was an act of solidarity for a union factory in Guatemala -- Cimatextiles -- where workers have been camped out for a month to prevent the facility from being shuttered.

Last month in Northern California, 11 Stanford students were arrested while protesting on campus to bring attention to the fair-labor program. The university agreed to adopt the program's policies a short time later. The entire University of California system had agreed to join in last year.

After a six-month grace period, a school's licensee will have to source 25 percent of its university apparel to factories where the designated-suppliers program's standards have been implemented. At the three-year mark, 75 percent of a licensee's university products should come from those factories.

A spokeswoman with the UC system said the schools have been trying to comply with those regulations, but even after a year, progress is difficult to track.

Students have successfully pressured their schools into inciting social change before. In the 1980s, student activists disgusted with the apartheid regime in South Africa convinced universities to make a stand through divestment -- ending financial investments in that country or in countries that conducted business with South Africa.

More recently, students have pressured some colleges and universities to brew only fair-trade coffee on campus to help struggling farmers.

Universities tend to be receptive to change -- especially when it comes to change painted with an idealistic brush, said SU Senior Vice President Tim Leary.

"We hold ourselves to ideals," he said. "It tends to surface here in some ways before it does in other places."

### **'It's everything you buy'**

Seattle University was receptive to the designated-suppliers program from the start, but student activists elsewhere haven't been as successful.

The University of Maryland is among a handful of schools that have declined to affiliate with the program, despite mounting pressure from student groups. Like many other schools, UM is a member of the Worker Rights Consortium and the Fair Labor Association -- both of which monitor factory conditions.

Joe Ebaugh, UM's licensing director, said the administration wants to promote fair labor overseas, but fears the program could force manufacturers to simply cut back on university apparel.

"If university-branded merchandise went away tomorrow, the big brands wouldn't even notice," he said.

For some students, eliminating sweatshop labor has become a personal crusade that won't end with graduation.

For Palmquist, a senior majoring in history, it started when he met with Cimatextiles workers during a class trip to Guatemala a year ago. There, he heard the story of a woman who lost her baby after fainting on the factory floor.

"She asked (her) supervisor if she could go to the bathroom and get (a) drink of water because she felt dizzy," he said "That was denied to her."

That happened before Cimatextiles was unionized. Now, union leaders have been receiving death threats, Palmquist said.

Since UW and SU have agreed to the designated-supplier program, he and other students are turning their energies toward drawing attention to Cimatextiles.

For Sean O'Neill, an SU sophomore, it's a matter of being aware of the injustices of the world. "It's so simple," he said. "It's right there in front of you. It's the clothes you wear, it's the appliances you use. It's everything you buy."

---

*P-I reporter Amy Rolph can be reached at 206-448-8223 or amyrolph@seattlepi.com.*

**© 1998-2007 Seattle Post-Intelligencer**

[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/320377\\_sweatshop19.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/320377_sweatshop19.html)