

Common council approves anti-sweatshop measure as sweatshop workers from Honduras and Puerto Rico visit Milwaukee

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Contact: Victoria Kaplan, 310-531-3415
Sachin Chheda, 414-412-6099

Measure will enforce responsible use of tax dollars; first test comes in controversial police uniform contract

The Milwaukee Common Council voted today to take concrete steps to end public purchasing from sweatshops by joining the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium. The vote comes as workers from Honduras and Puerto Rico visit Milwaukee on the “Economic Stimulus Tour” through Wisconsin to inform elected officials and American taxpayers about the dangerous and abusive conditions under which some government contracted products are made, a practice which has also led to the outsourcing of U.S. manufacturing jobs. The workers joined human rights and labor organizations in calling also on Governor Doyle to join the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium.

“This anti-sweatshop measure will help garment workers in my country because right now we face wages that keep us in poverty, twelve hour workdays, and unbearable daily production goals,” said Elizabeth Gutierrez from Honduras, about a factory which supplies a company that does business with Milwaukee.

“We want there to be investigations into the working conditions at our factory so we congratulate the city on this step, said Maritza Vazquez, a garment worker at Proper International in Puerto Rico. “Right now our legal rights to paid sick days and vacation aren’t being upheld. Policies like Milwaukee’s will help protect the rights of workers who sew their products and provide a better salary and better benefits which means a better life for us.”

The Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium assists member governments in meeting their goals for responsible sweatshop-free purchasing. It meets a critical need for information about supplier factories by providing expertise and pooling resources to monitor working conditions and enforce “sweatfree” procurement standards.

“When we expose and confront the abuses that workers face overseas,” said Sachin Chheda,

Director of the Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition, “we ensure that our tax dollars are not being used to exploit those workers. We also make it easier for American businesses that are doing the right thing to compete in the marketplace fairly.”

The workers were joined by the CEO of Sheboygan-based Wigwam Mills, a family-owned Sheboygan-based union sock manufacturer, for events in Milwaukee.

The City has an opportunity to act immediately on its commitment to only source from non-sweatshop facilities by awarding a major current contract for police uniforms to a bidder that adheres to the guidelines of the City’s 2003 ordinance.

“The City of Milwaukee took a giant step away from sweatshop clothing today by joining the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium,” said Steve Watrous of the Milwaukee Clean Clothes Campaign, which has advocated for ethical government procurement. “Now it has the opportunity to take another step by choosing a police uniform bid that is made in the U.S., at union wages, yet is still cheaper than the sweatshop bid.”

Ms. Vazquez and Ms. Gutierrez also met with administrators at UW-Milwaukee, where student and community organizations have called on the administration to endorse the Designated Suppliers Program, a commitment to ensure the rights of workers who make the clothing products sold on campus.

The Milwaukee events were part of a two-week tour through Wisconsin and the Pacific Northwest leading up to the April 15 publication of a new report exposing severe human rights and labor rights abuses in government supplier factories. Safariland, a company that supplies bullet proof vests to the City of Milwaukee, will be featured in the report, and preliminary findings reveal the use of child labor, mandatory pregnancy tests, and dangerous working conditions in the company’s Tijuana factory, which has supplied Milwaukee.

“In these difficult economic times, Governor Doyle has the opportunity to provide a boost to Wisconsin businesses and workers and to ensure that Wisconsin is not supporting sweatshops, by joining the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium,” said Victoria Kaplan, Midwest regional organizer for SweatFree Communities. “Unfortunately sweatshops are not a thing of the past even in 2009.”

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SweatFree Communities coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries by working with both public and religious institutions to adopt sweatshop-free purchasing policies. Using

institutional purchasing as a lever for worker justice, the sweatfree movement empowers ordinary people to create a just global economy through local action. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org

The Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium, comprised of states, cities, counties, local government agencies, and school districts, as well as human rights advocates and labor rights experts, will pool resources of public entities to investigate working conditions in factories that make uniforms and other products for public employees. Cities and states will hold vendors to ethical standards, and create a market large enough to persuade companies to deal responsibly and ethically with their suppliers and workers. Learn more at www.buysweatfree.org

The Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition is SweatFree Communities' partner in Wisconsin, and also works to promote a global trade policy that treats American business and workers fairly. Learn more at www.wisconsinfairtrade.org.