Maryland Still Using Companies Implicated in Sweatshop Abuses

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U.S. tax dollars still spent in sweatshops

Child labor, forced and unpaid overtime, toxic conditions found in government contractors’ facilities for second year in a row

U.S. state, local, and federal tax dollars are being used to buy products made in sweatshops and are contributing to outsourcing, according to a new report released today by SweatFree Communities. Today groups are gathering at Post Offices around the country calling on Governors and local elected officials to join the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium, which would stop tax dollar support for sweatshop abuses and level the playing field for ethical U.S. businesses. Since the report’s first edition was published in July 2008, more states and cities have committed to join the Consortium, including the State of Pennsylvania, the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the City of Portland, Oregon.

The state of Maryland purchases millions of dollars of apparel each year, and several Maryland’s largest vendors, such as Lion Apparel, Rocky Brands, Cintas and Fecheimer Brothers, are included in this year’s report for continued violations of human rights and labor rights. These companies were condemned in the first report for using child labor, forcing workers to work overtime without pay, paying less than minimum wage, discriminating against pregnant women, and unsanitary working conditions. Since those charges were made, Lion Apparel has taken significant steps to correct the violations. Many issues, however, remain unresolved. Workers are still reporting incidents of harassment and unsanitary working conditions. To date, Fecheimer Brothers has yet to acknowledge any the violations noted in the first report. In the report, Rocky Brands is found to source from a factory where children as young as 14 are working, workers forced to work for one month straight, 12 workers are cramped together in one dorm room, and workers report considerable environmental degradation like black water coming from the factory.

After learning about this problem last year, Maryland still hasn’t taken action. Sweatfree legislation introduced by Delegate Joanne Benson last year to the Maryland legislature would have established minimum labor standards and reporting requirements for apparel but the bill didn’t make it out of committee. The Maryland SweatFree campaign urges Governor O’Malley to sign an executive order for Maryland to adopt a sweatfree procurement policy and join the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium. Without a purchasing policy that includes minimum labor standards and increased monitoring and transparency, it is impossible to know that taxpayer money is not supporting sweatshops.

Download the report at www.sweatfree.org/subsidizing [1]

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The Maryland SweatFree Campaign is sponsored by Workers United (SEIU), Presbytery of Baltimore,
Progressive Maryland, and the International Labor Rights Forum.

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 [2].

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 [3]

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