

Report Exposes Poor Working Conditions at Government Contractors; New York State to Rein in Sweatshop Suppliers

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Contacts:

Liana Foxvog, SweatFree Communities, 413-586-0974

Eric Sharfstein, Workers United, 646-448-6408

Northampton, Mass. - “Made in USA” requirements provide little insurance against poor working conditions and low wages, according to a new report by SweatFree Communities released today, International Human Rights Day. It contends that the federal government should do more to ensure that the apparel it buys is made by labor-rights-compliant contractors.

Some states and cities have already taken action. Earlier today Governor David Paterson announced that New York is joining the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium, a new organization that assists members in ridding sweatshops from supply chains and providing incentive for ethical business practices. Initial members are Ashland, Ore., Austin, Tex., Maine, Milwaukee, Wisc., New York, Pennsylvania, Portland, Ore., and San Francisco, which together procure over \$50 million in apparel and textiles annually.

Governor Paterson said: “I believe that the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium will serve as a crucial tool in creating and maintaining standards of workplace fairness and safety in our global economy.”

Bjorn Claeson, Executive Director of SweatFree Communities, said: “Labor rights violations are human rights violations. Today, International Human Rights Day, we call on all government agencies, including the federal government, to join with New York and the other pioneering members of the Consortium in ensuring labor rights for workers who manufacture goods purchased with our tax dollars.”

The new report, Toxic Uniforms: Behind the ‘Made in USA’ Label, exposes poor working conditions at nine government contractor factories including poverty level wages, pressure on the job, poor benefits, health and safety problems, and discrimination. Nine of the factories are sole suppliers to Propper International and one (recently shuttered) was a sole supplier to Eagle Industries, held by parent company Alliant Techsystems (ATK). Propper International is the largest manufacturer of soldiers’ uniforms for the U.S. Army. Eagle has supplied the federal government and New York State. While outsourcing of jobs is prevalent in the cut-and-sew industry, as Department of Defense contractors, Eagle and Propper are required to produce in the U.S. or its territories under the Berry Amendment. However, as the new report shows, workers in Massachusetts and Puerto Rico, who manufacture goods purchased with our tax dollars, are far

from immune from abusive working conditions.

Elisa Rios, who worked at Eagle's New Bedford, Mass., factory for two years said: "Harassment, fear, desperation, sadness, unhappiness, tears – this is what we experienced daily in the factory."

Maritza Vázquez, a sewing machine operator at Propper's Lajas plant, said: "I understand that the type of labor we produce is very important because it's a job done for the U.S. military. I think we need to be more appreciated, offered better pay and better benefits. Management should have more respect."

In Puerto Rico workers at each of Propper's eight plants are organizing for union representation by the labor union Workers United. While ATK closed the New Bedford Eagle factory despite protests from the workers and politicians, a committee of sewing machine operators and their supporters persuaded a new government contractor, New Bedford Tactical Gear, to open in August. This week workers voted unanimously in support of the contract negotiated between New Bedford Tactical Gear and Workers United. The union contract provides for pay increases to \$10.60 in three years, a pension, an affordable health insurance plan, and more. The company currently employs fifteen former Eagle workers and is seeking additional government contracts in order to expand and hire more of the laid-off workforce.

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 use institutional purchasing as a lever for worker justice. www.sweatfree.org

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. www.buysweatfree.org

Workers United, SEIU is a union of 150,000 workers in the US and Canada who work in the manufacturing, distribution, laundry, food service, hospitality, gaming, apparel and textile industries. www.workersunitedunion.org

A copy of Toxic Uniforms: Behind the 'Made in USA' Label, is available at www.sweatfree.org/tu.