Wal-Mart, States Must Stop Sweatshop Abuses, Say Workers from Costa Rica and Cambodia to Ohio and Michigan Residents

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Agricultural and garment workers visit 10 cities while touring Midwest as Vermont becomes the seventh state to ban sweatshop purchasing

Giant purchasers like Wal-Mart and the States of Ohio and Michigan should implement policies that protect the rights of workers, rather than abuse them, two sweatshop workers told hundreds of people at events throughout the Midwest during a tour that took them to churches, universities, and union halls in 10 cities. The event was co-sponsored by the International Labor Rights Forum and SweatFree Communities.

"Because the United States imports many products from Costa Rica, I want people here, like consumers and governments, to know that their bananas and pineapples are produced in inhumane conditions with very low wages, in total violation of environmental and labor laws, and causing major health problems and other difficulties in life for the workers in these industries," said Didier Leiton, who spent 18 years picking pineapples and bananas for Del Monte in Costa Rica. Wal-Mart sells Del Monte products in its stores.

"The companies don't pay enough for us to buy food and support our children's education. We earn less than the minimum wage."

"In the factory where I work, I am paid $1.08 to $2.16 per day for the clothing I make," said Savin Phal, from Cambodia, who was fired, along with 18 other women, from her job sewing clothing for Wal-Mart because she tried to form a union at her factory. "I would like to ask Wal-Mart and people in the U.S. to put pressure on the owner of this factory, King's Land, to negotiate with our union and respect Cambodian labor laws and our rights." Ms. Phal described being forced to work overtime, and earning wages too low to cover basic living expenses.

The workers joined human rights and labor organizations in calling on Wal-Mart and Governors Ted Strickland and Jennifer Granholm to address ongoing problems by enforcing policies that require fair wages, a healthy workplace, and a voice on the job. Specifically, the groups invited the Governor to join the emerging State and Local Government Sweatfree Consortium, which would stop tax dollar support for sweatshops. The States of Pennsylvania, New York, and Maine are currently leading the Consortium effort.
Earlier this month, the State of Vermont became the seventh state in the nation to prohibit the purchase of apparel from sweatshops, as both the state House and Senate passed anti-sweatshop purchasing legislation. Organizers expect Governor Jim Douglas to sign the bill into law this month. More than 180 U.S. cities, states, counties and school districts have laws or policies that prohibit the purchase of apparel from sweatshops.

The State of Michigan currently spends $40 million taxpayer dollars each year on apparel such as uniforms for police officers and firefighters, that is often produced by people working in harsh conditions like those that Ms. Phal described. The State of Ohio spends about $10 million each year on apparel.

“It is essential that companies like Wal-Mart take seriously their responsibility for ending sweatshop conditions around the world. Wal-Mart must commit to paying a just price for its products so that the workers that depend on the jobs can afford to pay for their most basic needs,” said Trina Tocco, Campaigns Coordinator for the International Labor Rights Forum.

The event was part of a two-week tour through Ohio and Michigan to educate Ohioans and Michiganders about sweatshop abuses and inspire action to improve working conditions at home and abroad.

“In the year 2008, the abusive conditions found in sweatshops should be a thing of the past,” said Victoria Kaplan, Midwest regional organizer for SweatFree Communities. Governors Strickland and Granholm should do the right thing and stop spending taxpayer dollars on sweatshop abuses.”

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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

International Labor Rights Forum is an advocacy organization dedicated to achieving just and humane treatment for workers worldwide. ILRF promotes enforcement of labor rights internationally through public education and mobilization, research, litigation, legislation, and collaboration with labor, government and business groups. Learn more at www.laborrights.org

The State and Local Government Sweatfree 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 the same standards, use the same independent monitor for enforcement, and create a market large enough to persuade companies to deal responsibly and ethically with their suppliers and workers. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org/sweatfreeconsortium

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