Gap Child Labor Revelations “Wake Up Call for the Industry

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Contact: Bjorn Claeson, (207) 262-7277

Statement by SweatFree Communities and International Labor Rights Forum

Anti-Sweatshop Groups Call on Gap to Provide Immediate Compensation to Child Workers and Address Root Problems in Industry

Recent UK media reports that Gap Kids clothes were made by children as young as 10 years old working 16 hour days in conditions close to slavery in India are a wake up call for the industry and consumers. The fact that over a decade of corporate monitoring and factory investigations by one of the industry leaders in ethical and social responsibility has failed to eradicate such egregious human rights violations shows that very different measures are necessary in order to ensure humane conditions for workers who sew Gap clothing.

Gap’s announced responses to the revelations made by the British newspaper, The Observer, are inadequate.

â€œResponding by saying that only a very small portion of a particular order was produced by an unauthorized subcontractor without the company’s knowledge and that child labor violations in their supply chain are extremely rare obscures the fact that sweatshop conditions are the norm in the global apparel industry, including Gap’s supply chain. Substandard working conditions are also the norm in the U.S. apparel industry. Buyer-dominated supply chains have resulted in cheap prices for consumers, large profits for brands and retail chains, but dismal conditions for garment workers who absorb the true cost of production.

Responding by destroying the clothes so painstakingly made by children so that they cannot be sold to children in the United States appears to be a move designed to protect Gap’s image, and erase the memory of the Indian tragedy. Instead, the clothing made by these children could be preserved as a testimonial to the suffering of children in the global economy, a tool of remembrance and education to prevent repetition of similar tragedies.

Responding by reminding their vendors in India that the Gap really is serious about child labor may be part of an important educational effort, but this measure alone is not an adequate response to the tragedy of child abuse in Gap factories. Gap should be careful not to displace responsibility for children’s welfare to their production partners, but must take full responsibility for the wages and working conditions of workers who sew its clothing.
Faced with public outcry that Gap Kids clothes are made by kids in bonded labor conditions, Gap should focus on the source of the problem: its own buying and sourcing practices, secret factory locations, and workers’ inability to influence workplace decisions. Instituting more vigilant monitoring practices is not enough.

The corporate practice of creating codes of conduct for supplier factories and monitoring factories’ code compliance emerged in the mid-1990s after a number of high profile brands, including Gap, were widely scrutinized and criticized for substandard working conditions in their supply chains. Today, tens of thousands of social audits are commissioned annually by hundreds of apparel brands and retailers. Nevertheless, sweatshops and child labor persist. Companies say they expect more from their suppliers, but they are not willing to pay for it, and they are not willing to empower workers to monitor their own conditions.

We therefore call on Gap to make immediate restitution to the child workers in the factory in India and seriously address the root causes of the problem. As a first step, Gap should:

â€¢ Set up a fund to provide compensation for the children’s loss of income, ensuring that families do not plunge any further into poverty and debt, and that the children can attend school.

As a second step, Gap should commit to full transparency of its supply chain.

â€¢ Gap should publicly disclose all of its 2,000 suppliers. The Observer investigation provided a glimpse into one of their contractors, but what are conditions like in their other factories, spread out over approximately 50 countries around the globe?

Gap must also make a commitment to implement purchasing practices that result in:

â€¢ Fair Pricing: The prices paid to factories by vendors must be sufficient to allow them to pay workers a living wage and meet all other code requirements.

â€¢ Sustainable Production Scheduling: Order placement and delivery schedules should allow for reasonable production scheduling such that factories can fulfill orders without compelling excessive involuntary overtime.

â€¢ Long-term Commitments: The relationship between vendor and factory must be stable and long-term. Factories will have little incentive to invest in meeting code requirements unless vendors are willing to reward compliance with ongoing business.

Gap should ensure that workers can participate as full partners in workplace decisions that affect their lives. Gap should:

â€¢ Enforce its code of conduct in partnership with workers.

â€¢ Require factories to take proactive steps to guarantee workers’ right to organize without fear of retaliation.
Gap must, once and for all, close the gap between an image of social responsibility and true responsibility. Doing so would ensure that workers producing goods for Gap work under decent conditions. Doing so would also benefit other stakeholders. For factories, labor rights compliance would be rewarded with more dependable and less stressful relationships with buyers. For Gap, more fully compliant factories would mean better quality products and more reliable and efficient sources of supply. For all of us, consumers and workers alike, a leading apparel brand becoming truly responsible would be an important step towards a just and sustainable global economy.

SweatFree Communities coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries by convincing 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.

ILRF is an advocacy organization dedicated to achieving just and humane treatment for workers worldwide. ILRF serves a unique role among human rights organizations as advocates for and with working poor around the world. We believe that all workers have the right to a safe working environment where they are treated with dignity and respect, and where they can organize freely to defend and promote their rights and interests. We are committed to overcoming the problems of child labor, forced labor, and other abusive labor practices. We promote enforcement of labor rights internationally through public education and mobilization, research, litigation, legislation, and collaboration with labor, government and business groups.