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Olympic Sportswear a Product of Sweatshop Labour

By Zack Gross

Big name sports brands, such as Nike, Adidas, Puma and Umbro, are exploiting the rights of workers around the world in a mad scramble to churn out clothing, shoes and accessories in time for this summer's Olympics in Athens, Greece. This is the word from a consortium of international development groups, unions and sweatshop watchdog organizations who came out with a "Play Fair at the Olympics" Campaign last month.

In our country, Oxfam, the Maquila Solidarity Network and the Canadian Labour Congress have called upon the International Olympic Committee and sportswear companies to respect the spirit and ideals of the Olympics and not allow sweatshop labour-made goods to be sold at the Games and worn by athletes and fans alike. Garment workers in six countries, including Indonesia, China, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Thailand and Turkey, were involved in Play Fair research into labour practices related to this campaign.

The story of these sweatshop workers is one of sixteen hour workdays, 84 hour workweeks, and dollar-per-day wages. Workers often earn only 1% of the retail value of the item they have made. For instance, a pair of running shoes that would retail here for \$100 would represent only \$1 of wages to a garment worker in China.

Clothing manufacturers named in the Fair Play Report have responded. Nike has said that it is looking into these charges and will try to improve working conditions in factories it uses or is supplied by. Puma responded that it is skeptical of the Report findings, while Adidas says it has put a Code of Conduct in place and requires its

suppliers to comply with core labour standards. The problem specifically with the Olympics, said Adidas, was that the pressure from sales companies for logo clothing had forced factory managers to override proper labour standards in order to maximize production.

The history of the garment industry has never favoured workers rights. Whether at home, as piece work, or in factory operations, women, children and men have worked long hours for little pay in conditions that have put their health at risk. Few garment workers, on a global basis, have enjoyed health or social benefits, the right to organize in unions, severance pay compensation or even breaks for proper meals and trips to the bathroom.

Pressure in the 1990s by boycott campaigns forced the big name brands to monitor working conditions in their factories more closely and institute some reform, at least on paper. Fearing that they might lose their competitive advantage by being “too nice” to their employees (less hours, more pay, benefits), clothing companies have been slow to take too large steps in changing their ways.

The lesser known brands, such as Asics, Fila and New Balance, meanwhile have escaped the scrutiny of public interest groups and become the worst offenders. New Asian multinationals, who supply the big brand companies and often employ up to 250,000 workers, are able to tap the world’s reservoir of cheap labour and earn significant profits.

A member of the Clean Clothes Campaign, a European-based consumer lobby, has stated that “if hypocrisy and exploitation were an Olympic sport, the sportswear industry would win a medal.” Former Canadian Olympian Bruce Kidd, who has

endorsed the Fair Play Campaign, has encouraged the Canadian Olympic Committee to call for action by the IOC to stop sweatshop production of “Olympic-wear”. The various campaigns in progress hope to reach the average consumer and dissuade them from purchasing logo clothing, and complain instead to their local stores about how the garments were made.

In recent years, the Olympics have been beset by negative publicity due to the use of performance enhancing drugs taken by athletes, the politically motivated marks given to athletes by judges, and the political background of many of the IOC’s top organizers (Juan Antonio Samaranch, the past Chair of the IOC, and other “dignitaries” have been linked with many of the twentieth century’s worst dictators). If the Olympics are about fairness and harmony, why are its logo clothing – shirts, shoes, hats and so on – a symbol of exploitative labour practices?

Manitoba is currently home of the No Sweat Campaign, established to educate consumers of all ages about the working conditions associated with the clothes we wear. The Manitoba government is being lobbied not to purchase any sweatshop clothing. Students are being told that “being cool” doesn’t necessarily mean wearing the big name brands. The Marquis Project and its Youth Committee are planning a “No Sweat Fashion Show” for its Annual General Meeting in May.

As the word gets, people’s taste in clothing will change, based on ethical standards and the economic and social cost paid by the garment worker.

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