

SweatFree Procurement Forum for Purchasing Officials

Thursday, April 30, 2009

Next conference call: Thursday, May 28

4 pm ET/3 pm MT/2 pm CT/1 pm PT

Call: 218-339-4600

Access number: 858-342

Duration: 1 hour

Present:

Jonathan Rifkin, District of Columbia

Michele Reale, State of New York

Dan Soper, State of Washington

Diane Berndt, City of Milwaukee

Farshid Yazdi, City of Los Angeles

Henry Oyekanmi, City of Berkeley

Bjorn Claeson, SweatFree Communities

Victoria Kaplan, SweatFree Communities, facilitator and note taker

Topic: Behind the scenes of the investigation

Hear from the people who conducted worker interviews for *Subsidizing Sweatshops II* - Who they are, what they found, and what they think should be done next.

Guest presenters:

Reynaldo Corporan, organizer with FEDOTRAZONAS (Federation of Trade Zone Workers) in the Dominican Republic. He was part of the team that carried out research at the Suprema factory (producing for Propper International) in San Pedro de Macorís for *Subsidizing Sweatshops II*. He has four years experience working in Dominican garment factories. (With translation by **Jesse Stewart**)

Lynn DeWeese-Parkinson, lawyer, and a member and volunteer with CITTAC, the Worker Information Center in Tijuana, Mexico, where he participated in the research process for the Safariland facility (producing for BAE).

Announcements

1. NY DOL investigation

The New York Department of Labor raided a New York City sweatshop Tuesday night that was producing formal uniforms for the NY Police Department. The factory had been a repeated violator of New York law.

2. Vicki's transition

Vicki Kaplan announced that she will be shifting to a part-time position with SweatFree Communities as she moves to Ecuador for one year of graduate studies. She has served as the coordinator and facilitator of these monthly conference calls on sweatfree procurement, a role which will now be filled by Bjorn Claeson, Executive Director of SweatFree Communities, who has participated in many of these calls.

Summary of Vicki's introduction

SFC has received direct responses from Lion Apparel and BAE/Safariland regarding the publication of *Subsidizing Sweatshops II*, which featured investigations of 8 factories producing for 8 brands in 5 countries—all brands are major contractors with state and local governments or the federal government. We are aware that these two companies plus Rocky Brands and Propper International have responded to public entities. On the whole the responses included denials of

the report's findings, though BAE/Safariland has shown the most willingness to engage with us and has already taken steps to correct the issue of pregnancy testing at its Tijuana factory.

SFC has initiated a process of engagement with BAE/Safariland and we expect to be meeting with them within the next month or two to discuss the findings and remediation steps. We seek a similar process of engagement with other companies.

Farshid added that at the publication of the first edition of *Subsidizing Sweatshops* in July 2008, Lion Apparel wrote directly to the City of Los Angeles, but this year did not.

Summary of Lynn's presentation

Working with CITTAC for five years now. A representative of the Milwaukee Clean Clothes Campaign visited Tijuana and then SFC approached CITTAC about research for this report.

Research and interviews were conducted by four ex-*maquila* workers who have worked at CITTAC between 6-12 years, and me. All had more than 10 years experience working in *maquilas*. We met for about a week daily doing mock interviews with questions that were sent to us by SweatFree Communities, and practiced doing these interviews so as to be uniform on the delivery.

Workers come out of the plant and walk down a mesa for about a block and a half. We waited a block and a half away from the plant to intercept people leaving their shift. One of the prime methods of advertising for employers is through flyers, which is the tactic that we took. This way, the plant managers were not aware of who was participating in the interviews. Security for workers is a high priority.

No workers refused to talk with us, though many told us that there had been a meeting in the factory telling workers that they should have nothing to do with the interviews. Interviews were done on the street, and took 15-30 minutes. We conducted about 25-27 short interviews. Five people were selected at random to conduct longer, in-depth interviews in their home a week later. All interviews were conducted from written questions. I met with people before and after and acted as liaison with SFC but did not conduct the interviews myself.

Workers were very forthcoming. Intimidation from the factory management was not effective. CITTAC is well known, has been around for 19 years working in the *maquila* sector. A lot of the workers knew us but not all, but we were trusted to preserve their safety and anonymity.

When people were interviewed, the first thing people said was that this was a great place to work, everything is great. This is a very typical initial response. But when the interviews started going into more depth, they revealed that it wasn't so good. People earn about \$70/week. Conditions are not as bad as at many factories; they are generally not working with highly toxic substances, with the exception of one. We've seen worse in the area of health and safety. When questioned at length, workers tended to talk a lot about verbal abuse and underage workers in the factory. In general, this factory is pretty average when considering that all *maquilas* are exploitative. Workers here are working 10 hour days instead of 14 hour days.

I have a feeling we got better information than an academic interviewer would or that a corporate auditor would, because our interviewers speak the language. Particularly in Tijuana there is a lot of working class slang, which allows workers to loosen up and speak more freely.

Now: There appears to be no internal organization of workers. We were hoping to see that change. We are of the opinion that the only real change within the industry can come from worker organization itself. We also conduct tours regularly for all kinds of people – government representatives, academics, and others from the U.S. We always get asked how they can do

something to help. Frankly our standard response is, "organize up there." The U.S. is pretty much behind every other country in the world in terms of worker organization.

Summary of Reynaldo's presentation

I work for FEDOTRAZONAS in the Dominican Republic. I worked for four years in the factories myself and now am a supporter and organizer of maquila workers. I have experience documenting workers' stories in the free trade zone.

It was very interesting to conduct the research at the Suprema factory. It was evident that the workers had experienced a lot of trauma in regards to union organizing in the factory. The workers said, we'll talk about anything else, but please don't ask us about union organizing. So we had to change our interview strategy a bit; we asked about the conditions in the Suprema Factory. At 2003 in this factory union leaders and supporters were treated very badly in the factory.

Interviews were conducted in the workers' homes to create an environment as comfortable for the workers as possible. The goal of the interview is to get the truth, and the way to reach the truth is for the worker to be comfortable – not only with the surroundings but with the interviewer.

It's important to note that the workers have been facing a difficult time right now – even though they are earning a bit more than others in the free trade zone, their production goals are 2 to 3 times higher. Given this fact, and given the fact the workers can't form a union because of the intimidation in the factory, there needs to be some manner for workers to sit at the table and negotiate for better conditions.

In other factories that produce pants, things are different. Take for example a pant style like Levi's; a normal production line would involve 20-25 people on that production line. But the factories making uniform pants, there are 12-15 people on the production line, so the work is harder because there are more operations per person.

Of the 25 interviews we conducted, each one reflects overwork and excessive pressure to meet production goals.

A woman was fired after participating in an interview, simply because she was seen with a union leader. This is an example of the ongoing repression at Suprema. It is very important that the woman who was fired is reinstated at the factory. Though the company denies it, we are 100% confident that this is why she was fired.

Questions

Q: What can U.S. cities and state that do business with Propper due in the case of Sonia, who was fired for participating in the interviews?

A (Reynaldo): It's necessary to convince the company to reinstate the fired worker and to respect freedom of association in the factory. State and cities can write letters to Propper asking that the situation be investigated and Sonia rehired.

→ Dan requested that the Safariland response to SFC be shared.

Q: This is something new for us. We've started the process of identifying the brands. We're open to hearing from SFC or Reynaldo or Lynn about what we could do.

A (Lynn): One idea is for your city or state to communicate to SFC in the case of BAE/Safariland because we are going to be negotiating directly with the company. Something from local governments in the United States saying "we're watching this."

Q: We work through a vendor rather than directly with the brands. How does this effect who we talk to in regards to this issue?

A (Farshid): In one case, we needed to intervene and communicate directly with our contractor in regards to the conduct of the subcontractor. We had the contractor contact the subcontractor, and when that failed, this main contractor removed this subcontractor from their list.

A (Vicki): We've seen in the past that communication both with the vendor and the subcontractor or brand can be effective.

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