

SweatFreeCommunities

A Network for Local Action Against Sweatshops

Statement Regarding Just Garments

Response to National Labor Committee Communiqué April 24, 2007

April 26, 2007

SweatFree Communities always has stood and always will stand in solidarity with workers at the Just Garments factory in El Salvador – just as we stand with workers at other factories around the world who are struggling against overwhelming odds for decent working conditions and a voice in the workplace. We are a non-profit organization that supports and coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries by convincing public and religious institutions to adopt sweatshop-free purchasing policies.

Unfortunately, yesterday's communiqué from the National Labor Committee regarding the closure of Just Garments may engender doubt about our commitment to worker rights. According to the National Labor Committee, Just Garments workers are asking for help as the factory is closing "amidst sweatshop scandal." The alert urges activists to pressure SweatFree Communities to provide that help by raising money "to make these abused workers whole again," a demand that implies that we may be partially responsible for labor rights violations at the factory. The communiqué never explains why the National Labor Committee is targeting us.

Had the National Labor Committee – an organization we see as an ally in the anti-sweatshop movement – contacted us to discuss raising funds for Just Garments workers to allow a factory closure with dignity for workers we would have gladly joined with them. We and many other worker rights organizations already have organized and participated in multiple fundraisers to support Just Garment workers. During the past couple of months, we have been discussing a final fundraiser for precisely the purpose the National Labor Committee suggests. If you are in position to help, we invite you to contact us or to contribute to the Fund for Just Garments Workers set up by the National Labor Committee.

SweatFree Communities is committed to understanding exactly what went wrong at the Just Garments factory. The National Labor Committee is correct that "something went terribly wrong." However, just what went wrong is not as clear as their communiqué implies.

Yesterday we received a brief testimony from one of the founding workers of Just Garments, Delmi Barrientos, denying the National Labor Committee claim that workers are afraid to speak out against the company because they fear retaliation from the legal representative of Just Garments, Gilberto Garcia (who is not the "manager," a position that has not existed at Just Garments since August of 2005). According to Barrientos, *"It would be important for all the people to have all the true information because this that they are saying in the*

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[National Labor Committee] letter is not true, ever since I worked at Just Garments I never saw that Gilberto did anything so serious against us, as to make us afraid of him."

We have also received information contradicting some of the National Labor Committee claims from the union that claims to have represented 66% of the Just Garments workers until March this year; a letter from this union, the Union of Textile Industry Workers, accompanies this statement.

In addition we have begun contacting human rights groups in El Salvador to learn about their perspectives. We will continue this investigation in cooperation with other U.S.-based allies and let our contacts know what comes to light. The more we can learn from Just Garments' birth, history, and closure the more likely it is that future sweatfree and worker-organized alternatives will succeed.

One point about Just Garment that is not in contention is that it was indeed founded by workers themselves. In 2002, the Union of Textile Industry Workers demanded contract negotiations with Tainan, a Taiwanese-owned factory. Instead of negotiating, Tainan closed the factory, leaving 1,400 workers without jobs. Union members were blacklisted and prevented from getting jobs anywhere else. So they decided to take a bold step: start up the first worker-controlled union-made apparel company in El Salvador. The workers mobilized an international campaign against Tainan that resulted in its agreement to invest in the new worker-created company, Just Garments. Despite the hardships that Just Garments have faced in obtaining investment and sustainable orders in a business climate that, not surprisingly, was not very friendly, it appears that some of the founding workers have stayed with the factory from beginning to end, continuing to believe in the dream of creating sustainable sweatfree employment even at those times when there were not sufficient orders at fair prices to allow workers to be paid decently.

It is also important to keep the bigger picture in mind. Even stipulating to all allegations of labor rights violations and misappropriation of funds in the National Labor Committee alert, the Just Garments factory would be no worse than most other garment factories in El Salvador, Central America, and elsewhere. Unfortunately, labor and human rights violations are not the exception, but are the norm in the garment industry worldwide; this has been extensively documented by many credible researchers and human rights organizations. Widespread sweatshop conditions reflect the failure of the global economy, not simply the failure of individual factory managers or the corruption of single individuals.

In order to create fundamental and lasting positive change for sweatshop workers around the world we need to ask why factories that try to do right by their workers so often fail. We need to ask why factories established by workers, such as Just Garments, have such difficulties attracting investment and sustainable orders. We need to expose and discredit rules of the global economy which guarantee that sweatshop exploitation is the main viable competitive strategy in labor-intensive global industries. We should demand new and fair rules that guarantee respect for labor law and international labor and human rights by rewarding fairness and justice in the workplace and by penalizing sweatshop abuses.

SweatFree Communities is working to eliminate the market conditions that pivot on exploited labor. Along with many grassroots campaigns in the sweatfree movement we recognize the great potential for using government procurement and humane purchasing practices to build a system of fair trade and create positive alternatives to global sweatshops in apparel and other labor-intensive industries. To date, over 170 public school districts, cities, counties, and states in the United States have adopted sweatfree procurement policies. Close to 170 U.S. universities have also committed to sweatfree production of university logo apparel monitored by the Worker Rights Consortium. Yet, this

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ostensibly significant demand for products made in decent working conditions by workers who earn living wages have not resulted in sustainable orders for factories like Just Garments, founded on the principle of work with justice and dignity.

Students are now leading a new sweatfree campaign on college campuses around the country, aimed at consolidating university apparel production in factories that have demonstrated respect for the rights of their employees, including the right to organize and the payment of a living wage. SweatFree Communities is working with activists and leading government representatives to create a consortium of cities and states that will pool resources for investigations and monitoring of government supplier factories and coordinate contracting from sweatfree factories. Together we hope to build a multi-billion dollar market that operates according to enforceable labor rights rules, benefiting factories trying to do the right thing, including those factories organized by workers themselves.

You can help turn government purchasing into a tool for change in the global economy, making truly 'just garments' possible everywhere. Please contact SweatFree Communities if you are interested in learning more.

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