

In-Depth Integrative Case 1.1

Student Advocacy and “Sweatshop” Labor: The Case of Russell Athletic

Introduction

Outsourcing of production facilities and labor to developing countries has been one of the important business strategies of large U.S. corporations. While in the United States, a typical corporation is subject to various regulations and laws such as minimum wage law, labor laws, safety and sanitation requirements, and trade union organizing provisions, in some developing countries these laws are soft and rudimentary, allowing a large corporation to derive significant cost benefits from outsourcing. Moreover, many developing countries like Bangladesh, China, Honduras, India, Pakistan, and Vietnam encourage the outsourcing of work from the developed world to factories within their borders as a source of employment for their citizens, who otherwise would suffer from lack of jobs in their country.

However, in spite of the obvious positive fact of creating new jobs in the hosting country, large multinational corporations very often have been criticized for violating the rights of the workers, creating unbearable working conditions, and increasing workloads while cutting compensation. They have been attacked for creating a so-called sweatshop environment for their employees. A few of the recent targets of the criticism have been H&M,¹ Gap, Walmart,² Target,³ Nike,⁴ Adidas, Lululemon, Prada, Hermes, and Louis Vuitton.⁵

A major turning point for labor rights came over a decade ago in November 2009 when, after nearly two years of student campaigning in coordination with the apparel workers, the Honduran workers' union concluded an agreement with Russell Athletic, a major supplier of clothing and sportswear to college campuses around the country. The agreement included a commitment by Russell to put all of the workers back to work, provide compensation for lost wages, recognize the union and agree to collective bargaining, and allow access for the union to all other Russell apparel plants in Honduras for union organizing drives in which the company will remain neutral.⁶

This case addresses advocacy by students and other stakeholders toward one of these companies and documents the evolution and outcome of the dispute.

What Is a Sweatshop?

By common agreement, a sweatshop is a workplace that provides low or subsistence wages under harsh working

conditions, such as long hours, unhealthy conditions, and/or an oppressive environment. Some observers see these work environments as essentially acceptable if the laborers freely contract to work in such conditions. For others, to call a workplace a sweatshop implies that the working conditions are illegitimate and immoral. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (the name since July 7, 2004) would hone this definition for U.S. workplaces to include those environments where an employer violates more than one federal or state labor, industrial homework, occupational safety and health, workers' compensation, or industry registration laws. The AFL-CIO Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees would expand on that to include workplaces with systematic violations of global fundamental workers' rights. The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) defines sweatshops much more broadly than either of these; even where a factory is clean, well organized, and harassment free, the ICCR considers it a sweatshop if its workers are not paid a sustainable living wage. The purpose of reviewing these varied definitions is to acknowledge that, by definition, sweatshops are oppressive, unethical, and patently unfair to workers.⁷

History of Sweatshops

Sweatshop labor systems were most often associated with garment and cigar manufacturing of the period 1880–1920. Sweated labor can also be seen in laundry work, green grocers, and most recently in the “day laborers,” often legal or illegal immigrants, who landscape suburban lawns.⁸ Now, sweatshops are often found in the clothing industry because it is easy to separate higher- and lower-skilled jobs and contract out the lower-skilled ones. Clothing companies can do their own designing, marketing, and cutting and contract out sewing and finishing work. New contractors can start up easily; all they need are a few sewing machines in a rented apartment or factory loft located in a neighborhood where workers can be recruited.⁹ Sweatshops make the most fashion-oriented clothing—women's and girls'—because production has to be flexible, change quickly, and be done in small batches. In less style-sensitive sectors—men's and boys' wear, hosiery, and knit products—there is less change and longer production runs, and clothing can be made competitively in large factories using advanced technology.¹⁰ Since their earliest days, sweatshops have relied on immigrant labor, usually women, who were desperate for work under any pay and

conditions. Sweatshops in New York City, for example, opened in Chinatown, the mostly Jewish Lower East Side, and Hispanic neighborhoods in the boroughs. Sweatshops in Seattle are near neighborhoods of Asian immigrants. The evolution of sweatshops in London and Paris—two early and major centers of the garment industry—followed the pattern in New York City. First, garment manufacturing was localized in a few districts: the Sentier of Paris and the Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Tower Hamlets, and Westminster boroughs of London. Second, the sweatshops employed mostly immigrants, at first men but then primarily women, who had few job alternatives.¹¹

In developing countries, clothing sweatshops tend to be widely dispersed geographically rather than concentrated in a few districts of major cities, and they often operate alongside sweatshops, some of which are very large, that produce toys, shoes (primarily athletic shoes), carpets, and athletic equipment (particularly baseballs and soccer balls), among other goods. Sweatshops of all types tend to have child labor, forced unpaid overtime, and widespread violations of workers' freedom of association (i.e., the right to unionize). The underlying cause of sweatshops in developing nations—whether in China, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, or India and Bangladesh—is intense cost-cutting done by contractors who compete among themselves for orders from larger contractors, major manufacturers, and retailers.¹² Sweatshops became visible through the public exposure given to them by reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in both England and the United States. In 1889–1890, an investigation by the House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweating System brought attention in Britain. In the United States, the first public investigations came as a result of efforts to curb tobacco homework, which led to the outlawing of the production of cigars in living quarters in New York State in 1884.¹³

The spread of sweatshops was reversed in the United States in the years following a horrific fire in 1911 that destroyed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, a women's blouse manufacturer near Washington Square in New York City. The company employed 500 workers in notoriously poor conditions. One hundred forty-six workers perished in the fire; many jumped out windows to their deaths because the building's emergency exits were locked. The Triangle fire made the public acutely aware of conditions in the clothing industry and led to pressure for closer regulation. The number of sweatshops gradually declined as unions organized and negotiated improved wages and conditions and as government regulations were stiffened (particularly under the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which imposed a minimum wage and required overtime pay for work of more than 40 hours per week).¹⁴ Unionization and government regulation never completely eliminated clothing sweatshops, and many continued on the edges of the industry; small sweatshops were difficult to locate and could easily close and move to avoid union organizers and government

inspectors. In the 1960s, sweatshops began to reappear in large numbers among the growing labor force of immigrants, and by the 1980s sweatshops were again "business as usual." In the 1990s, atrocious conditions at a sweatshop once again shocked the public.¹⁵ A 1994 U.S. Department of Labor spot check of garment operations in California found that 93 percent had health and safety violations, 73 percent of the garment makers had improper payroll records, 68 percent did not pay appropriate overtime wages, and 51 percent paid less than the minimum wage.¹⁶

Sweatshop Dilemma

The fight against sweatshops is never a simple matter; there are mixed motives and unexpected outcomes. For example, unions object to sweatshops because they are genuinely concerned about the welfare of sweated labor, but they also want to protect their own members' jobs from low-wage competition even if this means ending the jobs of the working poor in other countries.¹⁷ Also, sweatshops can be evaluated from moral and economic perspectives. Morally, it is easy to declare sweatshops unacceptable because they exploit and endanger workers. But from an economic perspective, many now argue that, without sweatshops, developing countries might not be able to compete with industrialized countries and achieve export growth. Working in a sweatshop may be the only alternative to subsistence farming, casual labor, prostitution, and unemployment. At least most sweatshops in other countries, it is argued, pay their workers above the poverty level and provide jobs for women who are otherwise shut out of manufacturing. And American consumers have greater purchasing power and a higher standard of living because of the availability of inexpensive imports.¹⁸

NGOs' Anti-Sweatshop Initiatives

International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have attempted to step into the sweatshop conflict to suggest voluntary standards to which possible signatory countries or organizations could commit. For instance, the International Labour Office has promulgated its Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy, which offers guidelines for employment, training, conditions of work and life, and industrial relations. The "Tripartite" nature refers to the critical cooperation necessary from governments, employers' and workers' organizations, and the multinational enterprises involved.¹⁹

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, calling on all member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, and read. The Declaration recognizes that all humans have an inherent dignity and specific equal and inalienable rights. These rights are based on the foundation

of freedom, justice, and peace. The UN stated that the rights should be guaranteed without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional, or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs. The foundational rights also include the right to life, liberty, and security of person and protection from slavery or servitude, torture, or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.²⁰ Articles 23, 24, and 25 discuss issues with immediate implications for sweatshops. By extrapolation, they provide recognition of the fundamental human right to nondiscrimination, personal autonomy or liberty, equal pay, reasonable working hours and the ability to attain an appropriate standard of living, and other humane working conditions. All these rights were reinforced by the United Nations in its 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.²¹

These are but two examples of standards promulgated by the international labor community, though the enforcement of these and other norms is spotty. In the apparel industry in particular, the process of internal and external monitoring has matured such that it has become the norm at least to self-monitor, if not to allow external third-party monitors to assess compliance of a supplier factory with the code of conduct of a multinational corporation or with that of NGOs. Though a number of factors affected this evolution, one such factor involved pressure by American universities on their apparel suppliers, which resulted in two multistakeholder efforts—the Fair Labor Association, primarily comprising and funded by the multinational retailers, and the Worker Rights Consortium, originally perceived as university driven. Through a cooperative effort of these two organizations, large retailers such as Nike and Adidas not only have allowed external monitoring, but Nike has now published a complete list of each of its suppliers.²²

The Case of Russell Athletic

While some argue that sweatshop scandals cause little or no impact on the corporate giants because people care more for the ability to buy cheap and affordable products rather than for working conditions of those who make these products,²³ the scandal around the Russell Athletic brand has proved that it may no longer be as easy for a corporation to avoid the social responsibility for its outsourcing activities as it has been for a long time. November 2009 became a tipping point in the many years of struggle between the student anti-sweatshop movement and the corporate world. An unprecedented victory was won by the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) coalition against Russell Athletic, a corporate giant owned by Fruit of the Loom, a Berkshire-Hathaway portfolio company. USAS pressure tactics persuaded one of the nation's leading sportswear

companies, Russell Athletic, to agree to rehire 1,200 workers in Honduras who lost their jobs when Russell closed their factory soon after the workers had unionized.²⁴

Russell Corporation, founded by Benjamin Russell in 1902, is a manufacturer of athletic shoes, apparel, and sports equipment. Russell products are marketed under many brands, including Russell Athletic, Spalding, Brooks, Jerzees, Dudley Sports, and others. This company with more than 100 years of history has been a leading supplier of team uniforms at the high school, college, and professional level. Russell Athletic™ active wear and college-licensed products are broadly distributed and marketed through department stores, sports specialty stores, retail chains, and college bookstores.²⁵ After an acquisition in August 2006, Russell's brands joined Fruit of the Loom in the Berkshire-Hathaway family of products.

Russell/Fruit of the Loom is the largest private employer in Honduras. Unlike other major apparel brands, Russell/Fruit of the Loom owns all eight of its factories in Honduras rather than subcontracting to outside manufacturers.²⁶ The incident related to Russell Athletic's business in Honduras that led to a major scandal in 2009 was the company's decision to fire 145 workers in 2007 for supporting a union. This ignited the anti-sweatshop campaign against the company. Russell later admitted its wrongdoing and was forced to reverse its decision. However, the company continued violating worker rights in 2008 by constantly harassing the union activists and making threats to close the Jerzees de Honduras factory. It finally closed the factory on January 30, 2009, after months of battling with a factory union.²⁷

NGOs' Anti-Sweatshop Pressure

The Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) has conducted a thorough investigation of Russell's activities, and ultimately released a 36-page report on November 7, 2008, documenting the facts of worker rights violations by Russell in its factory Jerzees de Honduras, including the instances of death threats received by the union leaders.²⁸ The union's vice president, Norma Mejia, publicly confessed at a Berkshire-Hathaway shareholders' meeting in May 2009 that she had received death threats for helping lead the union.²⁹ The Worker Rights Consortium continued monitoring the flow of the Russell Athletic scandal and issued new reports and updates on this matter throughout 2009, including its recommendation for Russell's management on how to mediate the situation and resolve the conflict.

As stated in its mission statement, the Worker Rights Consortium is an independent labor rights monitoring organization, whose purpose is to combat sweatshops and protect the rights of workers who sew apparel and make other products sold in the United States. The WRC conducts independent, in-depth investigations, issues public reports on factories producing for major U.S. brands, and aids workers

at these factories in their efforts to end labor abuses and defend their workplace rights. The WRC is supported by over 175 college and university affiliates and is primarily focused on the labor practices of factories that make apparel and other goods bearing university logos.³⁰

Worker Rights Consortium assessed that Russell's decision to close the plant represented one of the most serious challenges yet faced to the enforcement of university codes of conduct. If allowed to stand, the closure would not only unlawfully deprive workers of their livelihoods, it would also send an unmistakable message to workers in Honduras and elsewhere in Central America that there is no practical point in standing up for their rights under domestic or international law and university codes of conduct and that any effort to do so will result in the loss of one's job. This would have a substantial chilling effect on the exercise of worker rights throughout the region.³¹

The results of the WRC investigation of Russell Athletic unfair labor practices in Honduras spurred the nationwide student campaign led by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), who persuaded the administrations of Boston College, Columbia, Harvard, NYU, Stanford, Michigan, North Carolina, and 89 other colleges and universities to sever or suspend their licensing agreements with Russell. The agreements—some yielding more than \$1 million in sales—allowed Russell to put university logos on T-shirts, sweatshirts, and fleeces.³²

As written in its mission statement, USAS is a grassroots organization run entirely by youth and students. USAS strives to develop youth leadership and run strategic student-labor solidarity campaigns with the goal of building sustainable power for working people. It defines "sweatshop" broadly and considers all struggles against the daily abuses of the global economic system to be a struggle against sweatshops. The core of its vision is a world in which society and human relationships are organized cooperatively, not competitively. USAS struggles toward a world in which all people live in freedom from oppression, in which people are valued as whole human beings rather than exploited in a quest for productivity and profits.³³

The role of USAS in advocating for the rights of the Honduran workers in the Russell Athletic scandal is hard to overestimate. One can only envy the enthusiasm and effort contributed by students fighting the problem that did not seem to have any direct relationship to their own lives. They did not just passively sit on campus, but went out to the public with creative tactical actions such as picketing the NBA finals in Orlando and Los Angeles to protest the league's licensing agreement with Russell, distributing fliers inside Sports Authority sporting goods stores, and sending Twitter messages to customers of Dick's Sporting Goods urging them to boycott Russell products. The students even sent activists to knock on Warren Buffett's door in Omaha because his company, Berkshire-Hathaway, owns Fruit of the Loom, Russell's parent company.³⁴

United Students Against Sweatshops involved students from more than 100 campuses where it did not have chapters in the anti-Russell campaign. It also contacted students at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, where Fruit of the Loom has its headquarters.³⁵ The USAS activists even reached Congress, trying to gain more support and inflict more political and public pressure on Russell Athletic. On May 13, 2009, 65 congressmen signed the letter addressed to Russell CEO John Holland expressing their grave concern over the labor violations.

In addition, the Fair Labor Association (FLA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to ending sweatshop conditions in factories worldwide, issued a statement on June 25, 2009, putting Russell Athletic on probation for noncompliance with FLA standards.³⁶ The Fair Labor Association, one of the powerful authorities that oversees the labor practices in the industry, represents a powerful coalition of industry and nonprofit sectors. The FLA brings together colleges and universities, civil society organizations, and socially responsible companies in a unique multistakeholder initiative to end sweatshop labor and improve working conditions in factories worldwide. The FLA holds its participants, those involved in the manufacturing and marketing processes, accountable to the FLA Workplace Code of Conduct.³⁷ The 19-member Board of Directors, the FLA's policy-making body, comprises equal representation from each of its three constituent groups: companies, colleges and universities, and civil society organizations.³⁸

Victory for USAS and WRC

As mentioned at the start of this case, on November 2009, after nearly two years of student campaigning in coordination with the apparel workers, the Honduran workers' union concluded an agreement with Russell that put all of the workers back to work, provided compensation for lost wages, recognized the union and agreed to collective bargaining, and provided access for the union to all other Russell apparel plants in Honduras for union-organizing drives in which the company will remain neutral. According to the November 24, 2009, press release from Fibre2Fashion, this has been an "unprecedented victory for labor rights."³⁹ Rod Palmquist, USAS International Campaign Coordinator and University of Washington alumnus, noted that there were no precedents for a factory apparently being shut down to dislodge a union and "later reopened after a worker-activist campaign."⁴⁰

This was not an overnight victory for the student movement and the coalition of NGOs such as USAS, WCR, and FLA. It took over 10 years of building a movement that persuaded scores of universities to adopt detailed codes of conduct for the factories used by licensees like Russell.⁴¹ It is another important lesson for the corporate world in the era of globalization, which can no longer expect to conduct business activities in isolation from the rest of the world. The global corporations such as Russell Athletic, Nike,

Gap, Walmart, and others will have to assess the impact of their business decisions on all the variety of stakeholders and take higher social responsibility for what they do in any part of the world.

More recently, a fire at a Bangalore textile factory in late 2012, and two horrific accidents at garment factories in Bangladesh in 2013, have placed renewed pressure on U.S. and European clothing brands to take greater responsibility for the working conditions of the factories from which they source products. On April 24, 2013, more than 1,000 workers were killed when an eight-story building collapsed while thousands of people were working inside. Less than two weeks later, eight people were killed in a fire at a factory in Dhaka that was producing clothes for Western retailers. After a number of investor, religious, labor, and human rights groups voiced concerns about the lack of oversight and accountability by the major companies, several of the world's largest apparel firms agreed to a plan to help pay for fire safety and building improvements. Companies agreeing to the plan included the Swedish-based retailer H&M; Inditex, owner of the Zara chain; the Dutch retailer C&A; and British companies Primark and Tesco. At the same time, the Bangladesh government announced that it would improve its labor laws and raise wages, and ease restrictions on forming trade unions. U.S. retailers Walmart and Gap did not commit to the agreement, expressing concerns about legal liability in U.S. courts. Instead, with the help of a U.S.-based think tank, they announced they would pursue a separate accord to improve factory conditions in Bangladesh.⁴²

Despite these promises by various companies and governmental organizations, and a commitment of over a quarter of a billion dollars, much work remains to be done. According to a report by NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, only eight out of over 3,000 factories in Bangladesh had cleared violations in the years since the garment fires and building collapse.⁴³ Additionally, workers still face unhealthy levels of dust and pollution inhalation, physical strain, long-term mental stress, exhaustion, and overheating.⁴⁴

Questions for Review

1. Assume that you are an executive of a large U.S. multinational corporation planning to open new manufacturing plants in China and India to save on labor costs. What factors should you consider when making your decision? Is labor outsourcing to developing countries a legitimate business strategy that can be handled without risk of running into a sweatshop scandal?
2. Do you think that sweatshops can be completely eliminated throughout the world in the near future? Provide an argument as to why you think this can or cannot be achieved.
3. Would you agree that in order to eliminate sweatshop conflicts, large corporations such as Russell Athletic should retain the same high labor standards and regulations that they have in the home country (for example, in the U.S.) when they conduct business in developing countries? How hard or easy can this be to implement?
4. Do you think that the public and NGOs like USAS should care about labor practices in other countries? Isn't this a responsibility of the government of each particular country to regulate the labor practices within the borders of its country? Who do you think provides a better mechanism of regulating and improving the labor practices: NGOs or country governments?
5. Would you agree that Russell Athletic made the right decision by conceding to USAS and union demands? Isn't a less expensive way to handle this sort of situation simply to ignore the scandal? Please state your pros and cons regarding Russell's decision to compromise with the workers' union and NGOs as opposed to ignoring this scandal.

This case was prepared by Professor Jonathan Doh and Tetyana Azarova of Villanova University as the basis for class discussion.

ENDNOTES

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