

A Message on Sweatshop Labor Issues From
President Philip E. Austin

March 29, 2006

The President's Committee on Sweatshop Labor, formed earlier this semester, is charged with overseeing policy, outreach, and management issues involved in possible exploitation of workers engaged in the production of goods bearing the UConn logo. The Committee is chaired by Professor Waldo Klein of the School of Social Work and includes students, faculty, staff, and the director of the UConn Co-op.

Over the past two months the Committee has looked closely at many critical issues, notably including UConn engagement with a proposed "Designated Supplier Program" (DSP) recommended by the United Students Against Sweatshops (and its UConn chapter) and now endorsed by the Worker Rights Consortium, a national anti-sweatshop group of which UConn was a founding member. In October 2005, UConn was one of the first universities to express support for the principles of the DSP.

The Committee has established subgroups charged with increasing awareness of sweatshop issues across the University community, advancing work on the DSP, and creating opportunities for collaboration with other colleges and universities. The Committee has worked closely with the Worker Rights Consortium on these activities, holding numerous in-person and telephone meetings with other WRC institutions interested in participating in the DSP, attending the WRC's January board meeting, participating in the February University Caucus meeting and initiating frequent correspondence with members of the WRC staff.

On Friday, March 24, 2006, UConn took an important step as a national leader on sweatshop labor issues. On behalf of the University, Associate Dean of Students Julie Bell-Elkins met with a special working group that included the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Indiana University, Duke University, Georgetown University, Santa Clara University and WRC representatives. The purpose of the meeting was to talk about ways we can design a collaborative implementation plan for the DSP. Our goal is to work together with these institutions to move this issue forward.

This working group will be developing specific plans of implementation for the program. The group will be meeting monthly to assure the progress of this initiative. Additional universities have already expressed interests in joining with us in this effort. The WRC will meet next month on the DSP implementation plan, and UConn will be represented by Dr. Bell-Elkins and two students who have been actively engaged on this issue.

As part of our effort to engage the UConn community on sweatshop issues, we have established a new web site, available at <http://web.uconn.edu/sweatshop/>. In addition to outlining UConn activities, the site contains a number of useful links that provide information about related social, economic, health, agricultural, human rights, and political issues.