

A message from President Philip E. Austin to the University Community – October 4, 2005

The University of Connecticut has long been concerned with the issue of sweatshop labor in factories involved in the production of goods that bear the UConn logo and, more generally, in factories and workshops throughout the world. In the summer of 2000 we were one of the first higher education institutions to join the Worker Rights Consortium, an advocacy and monitoring group consisting of universities, student groups, and non-government organizations. Every firm that produces UConn-logo goods must sign on to a Code of Conduct that promises fair labor conditions, the right to organize, safe working conditions, and other protections.

It is clear, that more needs to be done, especially in the area of verification and communication. Last semester I appointed a Task Force, chaired by Professor Mohammed Hussein of the Department of Accounting and including faculty, students, staff, and the leadership of the UConn Co-op, to explore various options. They presented a report in June and, following careful study, I accepted their basic recommendations. The report can be found [here](#).

A key Task Force proposal is that the University works collaboratively with other institutions to establish workable means of monitoring our suppliers to assure compliance with the Code of Conduct. The Task Force suggests that our licensing agent, the Collegiate Licensing Company (CLC) play this role. If this is not possible, however, other options-including the Worker Rights Consortium or other organizations-can be explored. I am less concerned with who does the monitoring than that it be done effectively, and that the entity that does it represent a large number of institutions.

A second recommendation is that I appoint an ongoing committee, not to make recommendations-that has already been done-but to oversee actions, and that a staff member is designated as the person responsible for working with the committee and, on a day-to-day basis, coordinating the many units of the University that play a role here. I am pleased to announce that Associate Dean of Students, Julie Bell-Elkins, has accepted this assignment. I will announce shortly the members of the oversight body.

The third set of recommendations relates to communications and curricular enhancement. This year the Dodd Center is commemorating its tenth anniversary with a year-long program of events focused on human rights in the global economy, and we expect the issue of sweatshop labor to be prominent among topics discussed. In a more immediate sense, I have asked Provost Nicholls and his office to explore curricular, research, and outreach efforts that can expand our range of programs in this area. We need to utilize our faculty's research and take advantage of our students' interest in order to have a major impact on the national dialogue.

Please take a moment to review the Task Force recommendations. I welcome your comments and suggestions.

October 4, 2005

TO: Members of the UConn chapter, United Students Against Sweatshops
FROM: Philip E. Austin

Last week you asked for a response to the USAS proposal for a “Designated Suppliers Policy”. In your cover letter you also raised additional issues relating to UConn’s engagement in the anti-sweatshop campaign. My response follows. If you would like to discuss these issues with me, please call my office (486-2333) for an appointment. I have reviewed the USAS proposal with care, and in so doing I consulted with several members of the President’s Task Force on Sweatshop Labor that I appointed last semester and that presented recommendations this summer. I also communicated with the leadership of other universities and asked members of my staff to reach out to others to get a better understanding of the USAS proposal and the process through which it will be considered by the Worker Rights Consortium. Specifically, we spoke to Scott Nova, Executive Director of the WRC; Jessica Rutter, National Organizer for USAS; and Jim Wilkerson, who handles licensing at Duke University and serves on the WRC Board. As background to the following, I ask you to review the attached table that compares the USAS proposal to current UConn practice and to the recommendations of the President’s Task Force.

Let me respond to specific points in your letter and to the key elements of the national USAS proposal.

1. You state that “communication between the UConn bureaucracy and students concerning sweatshops has been almost non-existent.

We can and will do a better job in this area. A first step was posting of the President’s Task Force Report on the UConn web site this week. Additionally, I sent an e-mail to the University community summarizing the report and outlining next steps. Two students served on the President’s Task Force and I plan to appoint students to the oversight committee outlined below.

Communication is not a one-way street. We seek ongoing dialogue with the members of USAS and other students, faculty and staff engaged in this issue.

2. You write that “Programs and curriculum focusing specially on issues of sweatshop labor and ever labor in general are few.”

A review of curricular offerings lists more than twenty courses that deal heavily or exclusively with labor issues. Multiple special topics courses in a range of departments have also covered labor and/or workers rights and economic justice concerns. Many other courses deal with labor as part of a more extensive curriculum. A comprehensive list is being prepared by the Provost’s Office, which can help guide further discussion in this area. Curriculum development is a faculty prerogative, but I certainly will support additional courses that are developed and evaluated in accordance with standard faculty review processes and meet the University’s standards for academic rigor.

The University has regularly hosted speakers on this topic, and supported and encouraged student groups to do so as well. This year in particular, in connection with the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center’s 10th Anniversary, a series of presentations focuses on human rights issues stemming from economic globalization. We expect that sweatshop concerns will be prominently discussed.

3. USAS contends that “Over the course of the past five years UConn has made very little progress in transforming itself into a sweat-free campus.”

Clearly we have not made enough progress. This gave rise to the appointment of the Task Force last semester, as it did to USAS’s recommendations.

What we have done, however, is not insignificant. We joined the WRC, at a time when many big universities stood back. We signed on not only to the Code of Conduct of our licensing agent, the Collegiate Licensing Company, but to a special rider protecting women’s rights. All contractors and subcontractors for the production of logo goods sign onto the code and any credible allegation of abuse would be referred to the CLC for investigation. All factories in which UConn logo goods are produced are listed for public view in Babbidge Library. When asked by the WRC, we have communicated concerns to manufacturers who have not cooperated with WRC investigations or are otherwise suspected of being in non-compliance with the code. The Co-op now has a union-made goods section.

Is this enough? No. Has it made a major difference in sweatshop conditions across the globe? No. That said, I am not aware of other universities that have been any more effective than we have been. Clearly, more needs to be done. As USAS correctly points out, no one university can do it alone. We need to explore collaborative approaches. Some aspects of the USAS proposal seem promising.

4. USAS says, “In factories where the workers have won the right to organize to improve their condition, orders have been disappearing, forcing factories to shut their doors as the multinational brands shift production to cheaper markets. Factories that have adopted fair labor contracts need international support and

factory owners that are considering contracts must see that recognizing basic human rights will not lead to bankruptcy.”

This is a vital point, well stated and right on target. It goes to the heart of one of the two or three basic problems faced by the anti-sweatshop campaign today. We are eager to find ways, in collaboration with others, to protect small subcontractors from the “race to the bottom.” We believe that everyone connected with UConn, including consumers, will happily pay slightly higher prices or receive slightly less in profits to address this issue. We are very eager to hear from the WRC about the specific ways they propose to deal with the issue, and whether they plan to adopt the USAS proposal in its original or modified form. But I want to make it clear that we support the thrust of this proposal.

5. USAS says, “The resolution (lies) in a change of strategy that only the universities can initiate...(T)he university should force the licensees to produce UConn apparel only in factories that have been designated sweat-free.”

This takes us back to an issue that was heavily debated in the late 1990’s. A key objective of the industry-engaged (and, some said, industry-dominated) Fair Labor Association was the principle of inspection and certification – a kind of “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.” The WRC rejected this approach for two reasons: first, there was no guarantee that the certification would be valid; and second, given the fluid nature of the production cycle, it was likely that conditions a month after inspection would not be the same as they were when the inspectors were around. Thus, consumers would be buying in good faith products with a “sweat-free” label of dubious validity. The USAS proposal addresses the first of these concerns (and, it should be noted, many believe that the FLA has established credibility of worker self-reporting might be an effective safeguard.

6. “A sweat-free factory is a factory in which the workers are paid a living wage and have the right to organize a union or a collective voice as a means of guarding against daily abuses.”

I would expand the definition of “sweat-free” to include prohibition of child labor, protection of women workers’ rights, and safe, clean working conditions. The phrase “or a collective voice” is troubling, since in China and some other ostensibly socialist states the workers’ organizations are essentially company unions. Elsewhere, as in the WRC’s first well-known case, the existing union turned out to be non-representative. We need to know more about how these organizations would be deemed appropriately representative.

7. “We have the ability to pressure multinational brands such as Nike into accepting the new standards because of the amount of profit the UConn brand generates.”

We need to be realistic here. The amount of profit the UConn brand generates is a trivial proportion of major producers' profit base. Purchasing power is not our real asset. What *does* pressure major corporations is our prestige and thus our influence with the broader market. We need to be sure that we use this tool effectively.

8. "By uniting with other schools that are following the same strategy (we) can affect significant change in the world."

It is vital that everyone understand, as USAS does, that whatever is done has to happen on a collaborative basis. We need to hear from other schools and from the WRC about the final definition of the proposal. The WRC staff has reacted positively, but the WRC board will only be initiating discussions at Thursday's meeting. The WRC administrators' caucus will hold its annual meeting this spring. Between now and then, we will be discussing the details of the proposal with our university counterparts, and the WRC board will be discussing and probably refining key elements. As mentioned, UConn has already initiated discussion the WRC leadership.

You conclude by saying that you look forward to my decision.

The University cannot issue a decision to join an enterprise that is not yet functioning and will only begin to be debated at the WRC Board level this week. If the question is whether the University will seek to use its influence within the WRC to promote adoption of the proposal, then, in addition to the points raised above, I offer the following regarding basic components:

Sourcing: We are in accord with the USAS goal but cannot yet subscribe to the specific timetable, pending further information about verification procedures.

Compliance: We support the USAS goal and need to work with relevant parties to assure effective monitoring. This will be the subject of ongoing discussion with the Collegiate Licensing Corporation, the WRC, and others.

Union Representation: We do not accept the USAS proposal that we will only deal with factories with labor unions or "other representative employee bodies." The key issue is assuring workers' *right* to organize. If it is credibly established that this right has not been infringed, the absence of a union should not preclude our dealing with a particular factory.

Restrictions on Customer base: USAS proposes that we limit our supplier base to factories that primarily (at least 66%) or exclusively produce for the university logo market or for other buyers committed to equivalent standards. I strongly oppose this proposal and urge USAS, the

WRC, and others to reject it. It may make monitoring easier, and thus serve our narrow self-interest. But in a larger sense, it takes the anti-sweatshop movement in exactly the wrong direction. Here is what I see as the major flaws:

1. The collegiate logo goods market is tiny as compared to the overall apparel market, and does not operate on a standard, predictable cycle. The typical factory gets an order from, e.g., UConn and fills it, and then must find other orders to keep workers employed. It is unlikely that other universities will fill that void in any predictable way. The factory must then either lay off workers until new university orders come in, or take business from others and thus go below the 66% threshold – ruling them out for further UConn work.
2. This creates a situation in which “good” factories, where workers are fairly paid, have a disincentive from expanding and making more good jobs available to greater numbers of workers.
3. The most fundamental problem is that this is an “ivory tower” solution. It lets universities “keep their hands clean” by dealing with a tiny proportion of factories and allows us to turn our backs on the vast number of others. It leads us to give up a prime asset – the ability to use our prestige to change conditions in factories where our presence is not large in dollar terms, but our potential influence is significant.

Monitoring:

This has been the key issue for the University’s Task Force. The WRC offers one potential route; the CLC offers another. It matters less who does it than that it be effectively done. I am flexible on this issue and await details of the WRC’s ultimate plan.

Fair Pricing:

As indicated above, this is a key issue and the USAS proposal may have merit.

I await the WRC’s response, and look forward to working with them and/or others on details of implementation.

