

# Portland Buying Goods from Companies that Use Sweatshops

For Immediate Release  
Contact: Deborah Schwartz

Thursday, February 1, 2007  
(503) 236-7916

## **City Council Urged to Join Multi-City Sweatfree Consortium to Ensure City Purchases Meet Basic Human Rights Standards**

Portland, OR - The City of Portland is purchasing goods from companies known to have partnered with subcontractors accused of labor and human rights abuses, according to new analysis of city procurement practices released today by the Portland Sweatfree Campaign. The campaign called on the Portland City Council to participate in a multi-city sweatfree monitoring and enforcement consortium and to pass a purchasing ordinance that would require vendors to sign affidavits certifying that all items sold to the City were produced under humane working conditions.

"Portland is purchasing items from companies with a history of doing business with sweatshops," said Deborah Schwartz, coordinator of the Portland Sweatfree Campaign for Global Exchange. "The only way to ensure that the city isn't supporting inhumane, illegal working conditions is to require city vendors to meet a basic code of conduct and for the city to join a national consortium that can monitor those commitments."

According to Portland Bureau of Purchase files, the city has contracts with vendors or has registered bidders known to have hired subcontractors accused of labor and human rights abuses:

- \* Russells operates Hermosa Manufacturing in El Salvador, a sweatshop manufacturer accused of owing its employees over a million dollars in back wages and blacklisting employees so that they cannot get jobs at other factories.

- \* Columbia sourced from an apparel facility in El Salvador known as Evergreen, which unlawfully terminated approximately 300 workers in retaliation for workers' efforts to exercise their associational rights and failed to pay their workers the full back wages, severance, and benefits. The factory closed, which could have been avoided had Columbia offered Evergreen continued business in exchange for positive labor rights performance. Long-term, stable contractual relationships that respect workers rights are promoted in the proposed sweatfree ordinance.

- \* Cintas is a registered bidder for the City of Portland "Laundry and Uniform Services RFP #106453". The company has encountered numerous problems with compliance of wage and hour, environmental, anti-discrimination, health and safety, consumer fraud and labor laws. The

federal Employment Equal Opportunity Commission supported a discrimination lawsuit against Cintas Corp. and OSHA cited the company for numerous violations after two fatalities at Cintas plants in recent years. In Mexico, workers reported that they are not allowed to speak to each other while working, and must wait for a ticket in order to use bathrooms that are dirty and often broken. In Haiti, workers also reported that despite the sweltering heat and dust-filled air inside the plant, they are left to drink from a tub of dirty water or forced to spend their already meager wages buying clean water.

"Most large clothing companies no longer produce their own clothes. They typically hire subcontractors to make the clothes for them, and that is where the labor and human rights violations most often come into play," said Liana Foxvog, national organizer of Sweatfree Communities. "Because the apparel industry is so complex, and so many sweatshops are fly-by-night operations, it is crucial that large-scale purchasers, like cities and states, join together to start pushing for industry-wide changes."

The Portland Sweatfree Campaign has asked Portland City Council to pass a sweatfree ordinance that would require all city contractors, subcontractors and vendors to sign a code of conduct certifying that goods sold to the city are produced in manner that meets basic labor and human rights standards. The ordinance would also commit the city to joining a multi-city and state consortium that would provide independent monitoring and enforcement services, and help to develop a set of sweatfree procurement best practices.

"Taxpayer money should not be used to subsidize human rights abuses," said Arthur Stamoulis, director of the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign. "For a city with such a strong tradition of supporting community values like fairness and sustainability, passing a sweatfree procurement ordinance should be a no-brainer."

The Portland Sweatfree Campaign began in 2006 to educate City Council on the steps Portland can take to help end sweatshop abuses. The campaign is currently endorsed by over 40 Portland-based community organizations. For more information, visit [www.sweatfree.org/portland](http://www.sweatfree.org/portland).