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Pirates Claim "Not To Know" About Sweatshop Working Conditions; Allegheny County Requires Greater Disclosure

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David L Laurence Convention Center

Pittsburgh - On Thursday April 17 the Pittsburgh Anti Sweatshop Community Alliance (PASCA) will speak before the Sports and Exhibition Authority and explain the need for the Pittsburgh Pirates Baseball Club to disclose the location of factories sewing Pirates apparel. The City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County have both inscribed our high standards for workers rights in anti sweatshop ordinances. Within the past week, the Allegheny County has begun implementing a requirement that bidders on County apparel contracts submit factory locations and wage data from factories they intend to supply apparel to the County.

The decision to require this information is in response to testimony about a Hanes plant in the Dominican Republic. The County procures Hanes apparel through multiple open contracts. Upon review of testimony from workers fired for union organizing from Hanes contractor TOS Dominicana, it became apparent that procurement officials could not determine which Hanes factories were being utilized and that bidder's certification that they have "no knowledge" of sweatshop conditions are frivolous.

Threw layers of contractors, labels, licensers, wholesalers and retailers, it is standard practice for the sellers of apparel items to be systematically sheltered from knowledge of sweatshop working conditions. As members of PASCA are fond of saying, "It is their business not to know."

The point of the anti sweatshop policies is not to abandon workers in sweatshops by withdrawing contracts, but to leverage public reporting and buying power to protect workers' Human Rights and remedy factory conditions. Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee spoke at Carlow College on Wednesday April 9 of this year where he presented testimony from workers at another Hanes contractor.

Kernaghan's National Labor Committee worked with the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity, the same group that visited Freedom Corner on October 16, 2004, to expose rampant child labor and theft of wages at Harvest Rich:

Some of the child workers are clearly so young that Harvest Rich management could not dare attempt to turn them into malnourished adults, no matter how much they threatened the children to lie about their ages.

After months of Hane's insistence that their internal monitoring of working conditions was adequate, factory conditions at Harvest Rich have vastly improved and the children working there have been sent to school. A review of factory locations and wage disclosures from bidders providing the County with Hanes apparel in coming months will help the City and County further refine their respective anti sweatshop policies.

The Sports and Exhibition Authority owns PNC Park and manages the huge debt incurred by the citizens of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County to build it. Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and Dan Onorato appoint the members. While the Pirates have consistently claimed that PASCA's information about sweatshop labor conditions is inadequate and that Major League Baseball's insistence that its licensees have no knowledge of sweatshop conditions should satisfy Pittsburghers, the experience enforcing the anti sweatshop ordinance in Allegheny County demonstrates otherwise.

The Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) already has many years of experience trying to leverage apparel licensing agreements to protect workers rights. Most importantly, its colleges and university affiliates have adopted disclosure standards and investigative protocols that cut through the apparel industry's business of not knowing about sweatshop working conditions. PASCA renews its call on the Sports and Exhibition Authority to host the WRC in Pittsburgh and present its testimony and recommendations to the Pittsburgh Pirates Baseball Club.

This is colleges, universities, and local governments addressing our Human Rights practices and developing best practices. Companies like the Pirates presume to represent our community and have a special obligation to protect labor rights in factories sewing apparel with logos that represent our region. Tim Stevens is the Chairperson of the Black Political Empowerment Project, and participated in the 2006 All Star protest at the Roberto Clemente Statue.

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