



June 27, 2013

**HUFF
POST** **POLITICS**

Human Rights Activists Protest NBA-Linked Sweatshops

Many celebrities will be in the stands to watch the Los Angeles Lakers play the Orlando Magic in the NBA finals at Amway Arena tonight, and even more Hollywood stars and political types will be at Staples Center Tuesday night if a 6th game is necessary. But outside both arenas, human rights, labor, and student activists will be picketing to protest the NBA's links with a global corporation that violates workers' rights and subjects them to sweatshop conditions.

The protesters want the NBA to end its \$125 million deal with the Russell Corporation, which owns Spalding and Huffy Sports, the official makers of NBA basketballs and backboards. Russell is also the NBA's official institutional uniform provider. The company, which had \$562 million in sales in 2007, also makes uniforms and equipment for pro baseball and football teams as well as many high schools and universities. Russell is a subsidiary of Fruit of the Loom, which is owned by Berkshire Hathaway, headed by billionaire Warren Buffett.

The NBA's deal with Russell is the apparel firm's biggest contract. Indeed, it is the biggest equipment deal in professional sports.

United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), along with its union and human rights allies, have sought, without success so far, to meet with NBA Commissioner David Stern to discuss Russell's labor practices. It has launched one website to provide more information about the campaign and another to encourage fans to write to Stern.

The protests include leaflets, picket signs, and a life-size puppet of Stern, all designed to educate fans about the NBA's complicity with Russell's controversial workplace abuses.

The NBA is only one of several targets of USAS' campaign to draw attention to Russell's human rights abuses. The campaign has heated up in recent months, with activists bringing their crusade to universities that do business with Russell, retail stores that sell Russell clothing, Berkshire Hathaway stockholders, and even the U.S. Congress.

In addition to its contract with the NBA, Russell produces t-shirts, sweatshirts and other apparel for many universities under licensing agreements that allow the firm to use the colleges' names and logos on items sold in campus bookstores and other retail outlets. Students activists have complained about Russell's labor abuses in its Honduran factories, well documented by the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), a non-profit human rights group that has been monitoring the plants.

More than 70 colleges and universities so far have cut ties with Russell in response to protests from student activists affiliated with USAS and human rights groups. These include five of the top seven schools that feed players to the NBA -- North Carolina, UCLA, University of Connecticut, Duke and Florida. Four players for the NBA finalists attended schools that have ended their Russell contracts - Lakers Trevor Ariza (UCLA), Jordan Farmar (UCLA), and Josh Powell (NC State), along with the Magic's JJ Redick (Duke). The University of Florida, which cut its ties to the sportswear maker earlier this month, is the latest university to revoke Russell's license to use its logo.

USAS recently sponsored a tour of American campuses for workers from Russell's Jerzees de Honduras factory. One of those workers, Norma Mejia, told her story, including death threats and other abuses against workers, at Berkshire Hathaway's shareholder meeting in May, including a heated exchange with Russell CEO John Holland, which can be seen on YouTube.

Last month, 65 members of Congress wrote a letter to Holland, condemning "severe violations of internationally recognized labor rights" based on "troubling reports from credible labor rights monitors [that] detail numerous violations of workers' associational rights at Jerzees de Honduras," one of Russell's plants.

The student activists have also been leafleting outside Sports Authority stores in cities across the nation, asking customers to urge the giant retail chain to stop selling Russell's products.

For years, workers at Russell's Honduras factories that produce the universities' clothing have complained about low wages (an average of less than \$1.50 an hour), unsafe drinking water, verbal abuse, and other labor violations. But they didn't simply complain. They stood up for their rights and joined together to form a union. In response, Russell engaged in what the WRC called a "campaign of retaliation and intimidation" against the workers. The WRC conducted interviews with workers and management and issues several reports documenting the company's violations of worker rights.

Over a two-year period, Russell factory managers used illegal and threatening tactics to stop workers at two of the company's Honduran factories from exercising their right to organize and bargain collectively, a right explicitly protected by the codes of conduct of Russell's university business partners. The intimidation campaign included the illegal firing of 145 union supporters in 2007 and the persistent harassment of union activists and constant threats to close the Jerzees de Honduras factory in order to punish the union.

In January, only days after workers rejected the company's stingy offer - a four cent per day wage increase -- Russell made good on its threat and closed down its only unionized factory in the country, Jerzees de Honduras, leaving 1,800 workers without jobs. It also placed them a computerized blacklist, making it extremely difficult for them to find other work.

Although Russell insists that it closed the factory economic reasons, the WRC reports indicate otherwise. The WRC documented that on over 100 occasions, the factory's managers told workers that they would shut the factory if employees continued to organize a union.

The WRC, which works closely with 185 universities to monitor working conditions in factories that manufacture clothing made by licensees, has outlined a series of remedial steps for Russell to demonstrate its good faith, but so far the company has failed to comply.

USAS's successful campaign to get universities to end their contracts with Russell was designed to pressure Russell to comply with Honduran labor laws and the labor codes of conduct adopted by many universities that do business with global apparel corporations. These campus codes of conduct are the fruit of many years of student anti-sweatshop activism which began at Duke in 1997 and spread to hundreds of campuses, involving students in sit-ins, hunger strikes, rallies, sweatshop fashion shows, and negotiations with college administrators.

Other colleges that have ended their licensing agreements with Russell include Boston College, Brown, Carleton, Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown, Harvard, Marquette, Montana State, Northwestern, NYU, Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers, St. Louis University, Stanford, Louisville, Maryland, Minnesota, University of Miami, University of Houston, Penn, Wisconsin, Villanova, University of Washington, Brandeis, Hamilton, and the entire University of California system.

So far, the NBA Players Association - whose president is Lakers guard Derek Fisher - has not spoken out publicly on this controversy. What could the players union -- which has made it possible for even ordinary players to become millionaires (average salary: \$4 million) -- do to demonstrate its solidarity with their fellow unionists in Honduras? In the off-season, the players union could send a fact-finding delegation of players to meet with the Russell employees and inspect the working conditions at its Honduran factories, in partnership with the WRC - a gesture that would shine a spotlight on Russell's outrageous labor practices.

Surely there are some NBA players with a social conscience who could bring this issue to the Players Association's annual meeting June 24-26 at Wynn's Encore Hotel in Las Vegas.

(One likely candidate is the union's first vice president, Adonal Foyle of the Orlando Magic. A native of the Caribbean islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and a magna cum laude graduate of Colgate University, he is a long time political activist who started Democracy Matters "to help students fight for progressive change by standing up to big money interests corrupting our democracy").

Meanwhile, ordinary consumers can look for the Russell label when they go shopping, and tell store managers that they won't buy Russell products until the company cleans up its act. For consumers with a conscience, boycotting Russell is a slam dunk.

Peter Dreier is professor of politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy program at Occidental College in Los Angeles.