

Why Should the Pittsburgh Pirates Sign the “We-Are-Global-Familee” Anti-Sweatshop Resolution? -- A Response to Major League Baseball

Morris Jacobs? Jacobs was a nothing, a nobody. A contractor, yes, that is right. My sister and I, we worked for him at the Triangle. ... He was our boss, and then he worked for the big bosses, that's right. That's how they did it. A lot of bosses all in a row and that way nobody at the top was responsible for anything at the bottom because they didn't know. They didn't care to know. Nothing changes in this world.

-- Interview of Esther Gottesfield, survivor of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory fire, New York City, March 25, 1911. The fire claimed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers.¹

... we are very proud of the accomplishments of our licensees and what they have done and are doing in communities worldwide to provide gainful employment to tens of thousands of people, in all cases what we understand to be full compliance with all applicable labor laws.

-- Ethan G. Orlinsky, Senior Vice President and General Counsel to Major League Baseball, letter to Tim Stevens, Chairman, The Black Political Empowerment Project, July 7, 2006.

Nothing changes indeed.

Take Bangladesh where Nike makes Pittsburgh Pirates and other Major League Baseball caps.

Today's Triangle Shirt Waist tragedies take place with frightful frequency in Bangladesh where safety conditions are so bad catastrophic factory fires killed hundreds of workers in three separate incidents in just one deadly week in February, 2006. Locked exits prevented workers from escaping one burning factory, the main gate having been locked intentionally once the fire was detected to prevent theft from the factory. Many of the victims were children between the ages of 10 and 13, as were many of the victims of the Triangle Shirt Waist factory fire.

In the wake of one fire, a former worker said, *"We need work but we need dignity. We go to the factories to work, not to die."*

“No Legitimate Basis” for Claims of Wrongful or Improper Behavior

Ethan Orlinsky (responding on behalf of the Pittsburgh Pirates to PASCA's and SweatFree Communities' demand that the Pirates be accountable for the working conditions in which their logo apparel is sewn) demanded proof that sweatshop violations are real. In a letter addressed to PASCA member and the Chairman of the Black Political Empowerment Project, Tim Stevens, Orlinsky wrote:

¹ Ruth Zion transcription, July 15, 2000, quoted in Weber, Katherine, Triangle, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

*"...Whenever we have been told that a licensee has engaged in wrongful or improper behavior of any kind," wrote Orlinsky, "including actions involving their employees, we have investigated each of these accusations and, in each instance, are pleased to report that we have **never found any legitimate basis for these claims.**"² In a subsequent meeting with PASCA he demanded to see "concrete evidence" of sweatshop abuse.*

If Major League Baseball really never has uncovered any wrongful or improper behavior of any kind on the part of their licensees, one must question the competency of their investigators. Even licensees themselves now publicly admit to serious and chronic human rights violations in most of their factory base, including physical and verbal abuse, restricted access to toilets and drinking water, forced overtime, and below minimum wages. In 2005, for example, Nike admitted that up to 50% of its Asian factories restricted access to toilets and drinking water; up to 50% of factories deny workers even one day off every week; and in 25% of factories workers are paid below even inadequate legal minimum wages.³ In short, licensees themselves admit that they and contractors are not entirely in "*full compliance with all applicable labor laws,*" Orlinsky's and Major League Baseball's claim to the contrary notwithstanding.

Additional quite legitimate reports of wrongful behavior on the part of Major League Baseball licensees engaged in sportswear or sports equipment manufacturing include ...

... **an Oxfam International 2006 report** that companies such as Adidas, Nike, and Reebok make sportswear in Southeast Asia in conditions of:⁴

- Forced overtime, up to 16 hour shifts.
- Chronic work pain caused by repeated performance of the same task over long periods.
- Intrusive and humiliating physical exams required of women to prove they are menstruating in order to receive their legal entitlement to menstrual leave.

... **a Clean Clothes Campaign 2006 investigation** of Adidas, Reebok, Nike, Russell Athletic, and others in El Salvador, finding:⁵

- Violations of national and international labor standards.
- Illegal deduction of wages for illness, delayed payments, and failure to pay overtime salaries and maternity benefits.

² Ethan G. Orlinsky, Senior Vice President and General Counsel to Major League Baseball, letter to Tim Stevens, Chairman, The Black Political Empowerment Project, July 7, 2006.

³ See Corporate Responsibility Report at:

http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/gc/r/fy04/docs/FY04_Nike_CR_report_full.pdf

⁴ "Offside! Labour Rights and Sportswear Production in Asia."

http://us.oneworld.net/external/yahoo.php?url=http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/press_releases/press_release.2006-05-23.4838823080

⁵ See: <http://www.cleanclothes.org/urgent/06-03-21.htm#his>

- Workers being fired for organizing to improve working conditions, receiving no severance pay, and being blacklisted by other garment factories in the area.

... **a National Labor Committee 2005 investigation** of the production of National Basketball Association and National Football League jerseys in Honduras, revealing:⁶

- Workers being locked in a factory compound ten to thirteen hours a day.
- Supervisors insulting, shouting and cursing at workers, constantly speeding up the production lines.
- Workers needing permission to use the bathroom—and if they take too long, supervisors coming to get them out.
- Workers earning a base wage of just 65 cents an hour, which meets only 60 percent of a family's basic food needs, leaving them trapped in deplorable living conditions.
- Workers having no idea that the NFL or the NBA even have codes of conduct which are supposed to protect their rights.

... **a National Labor Committee 2004 report** on the conditions in which Nike and Adidas produces National Basketball Association jerseys and shorts in El Salvador, revealing:⁷

- Forced pregnancy tests.
- Forced overtime -- without pay -- to meet production goals.
- Filthy and unsafe drinking water.
- Surveillance cameras in the bathrooms and on the shop floor.
- Unions prohibited -- organizers immediately fired.
- Codes of Conduct posted, but meaningless to workers.
- Constant pressure and humiliation—workers screamed at and cursed at to go faster.

... and finally, **a National Labor Committee 2004 investigation** into the conditions in which Rawlings manufactures Major League Baseballs in Costa Rica, revealing:⁸

- Factory temperatures of 97 degrees Fahrenheit.
- 10-hour work days in which the worker's body is in an awkward position bent over her press, repeating the same strenuous stitching motion, pulling her arms up and out, hour after hour, day after day.
- 80 percent injury rate of the baseball sewers who suffer some form of repetitive motion disorder – to their back, shoulders, wrists, hands, and especially their vision due to the constant need to focus and concentrate.

⁶ See: http://www.nlcnet.org/news/han_sol_report_web.pdf

⁷ See: <http://www.nlcnet.org/campaigns/archive/elsalvador/0401/chifung.shtml>

⁸ National Labor Committee, "Foul Ball: Major League baseballs sewn by sweatshop workers in Costa Rica, denied their rights & paid just 25 cents for each ball they make."
<http://www.nlcnet.org/campaigns/rawlings/download.asp>

- Workers injured badly enough so that they cannot consistently reach their minimum quota of producing 156 baseballs a week are fired.
- Locked bathrooms, permission required to use the toilets, bathroom use limited to three a day.
- Talking during working hours prohibited.

Contrary to what may be inferred from the Orlinsky's letter, human rights abuse in the global apparel industry is not an aberration, but the logical result of trade rules and industry relations that reward sweatshop exploitation, and penalize decency and fairness in the workplace. Improving sweatshop working conditions is not a matter of detecting and discarding the occasional "bad apple" in an otherwise sound industry, but helping to change the rules for the industry by using our influence as large consumers.

Being in denial about sweatshops is like being in denial about global warming. We do not need more studies, investigations, and revelations of the horrors of sweatshop abuse. We need action now.

A Lot of Bosses All in a Row

Which brings us back to the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Each and every one of us in the global apparel industry supply chain can and should act on our responsibility to make sure we do not clothe ourselves in worker abuse. This is very much true for individual baseball teams who have a special responsibility as enormously large consumers and as proprietors of a logo that represents the values of their community. We know that fans of the Pittsburgh Pirates do not want that logo associated with worker abuse and human rights violations, but expect that the Pirates logo represents fair play and decency whether on the baseball field or in the field of global factories. We know that the Pittsburgh Pirates community does not want the Pirates to contract responsibility for its logo to Major League Baseball. And we certainly know that the Pittsburgh Pirates does not want to wait until the next revelation of sweatshop horrors among Major League Baseball licensees to take action.

The "We-are-Global-Familee" anti-sweatshop resolution is a very reasonable first step for the Pittsburgh Pirates which will set an example for the rest of the league. Committing to this resolution on July 11, 2006, during the Baseball All Star Game, the Pittsburgh Pirates will earn the distinction of becoming the first Anti-Sweatshop All Stars in the baseball world.