

Staff 'exploited' in Olympic rush

Sportswear firms are ignoring workers' rights in a rush to get goods on the shelves in time for the Olympics, say Oxfam and UK trade unions.

Low wages, forced overtime and curbs on trade unions are in place at sports clothing factories all over the world, they claim.

The report points to standards being undermined for workers in countries such as Cambodia, China and Thailand. The 2004 Olympics will take place in Athens, beginning on 13 August.

Oxfam and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) said suppliers were forcing their staff to work longer hours for less money, keeping them in a life of poverty.

Companies were accused of employing "ruthless" tactics to produce the latest sportswear cheaper and faster.

Those countries also picked out by the report were Bulgaria, Indonesia and Turkey.

Sweatshops

Nike, Adidas, Puma and Umbro were among the firms examined in a drive to crack down on sweatshop labour, called 'Play Fair at the Olympics'.

Sports manufacturers broadly welcomed the Play Fair campaign and said they were working towards improving and safeguarding conditions for workers.

Nike said it welcomed the report and was working with independent groups to improve working conditions.

Adidas said it already had a code of conduct in place which requires its suppliers to comply with core labour standards.

Puma, meanwhile, said its was "sceptical" of Oxfam's findings relating its clothing sources and UK sportswear firm Umbro had no immediate comment.

Cut-throat

Campaigners accused companies of being "superficial" and said they were often ignored by buyers who employed "cut-throat tactics" to reach targets.

Pressure from companies was forcing factory managers to override labour standards, the report claimed.

"If hypocrisy and exploitation were an Olympic sport, the sportswear industry would win a medal," said a spokesman for the Thai Labour Campaign.

A spokeswoman for the International Olympic Committee said the organisation shared the same values as Oxfam and the TUC.

She said the IOC did not control the licensing of products, and that the committee was working with a world federation of sporting goods to make sure companies respected good employment practices.

'Double shift'

One case highlighted by the report was a 22-year-old migrant worker in Thailand who works till 0200 during the peak season.

"We always have to work a double shift. Although we are exhausted, we have no choice," he said.

"We cannot refuse overtime work because our standard wages are so low."

TUC general secretary Brendan Barber said: "The Olympic Games are supposed to be a showcase for fairness and human achievement, but the sportswear industry is violating that spirit by exploiting and abusing workers' rights."

Jasmine Whitbread, International Director at Oxfam, said most workers in the sportswear industry were women, adding: "They are paying a heavy price for their jobs.

"Their health, the welfare of their children and their family life are suffering as a result of long hours, poor working conditions and low pay.

"If women workers are going to escape from poverty we need to change the way these companies do business and make trade fair."

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3531625.stm>