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"Exploited" workers rush to get gear ready for Olympics

CBC SPORTS ONLINE - Faster, longer and cheaper – that's how producers of sporting goods want their employees to work.

According to humanitarian organization Oxfam, suppliers to sportswear companies like Nike and Adidas are exploiting millions of workers in the rush to get athletes outfitted for the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics.

A 75-page report released on Thursday called "Play Fair at the Olympics" claims suppliers, in order to get their product ready for the Games in August, are forcing employees to work longer and harder for less money.

It says workers are sometimes forced to put in 16-hour days, are fired for refusing overtime and are intimidated for attempting to form unions.

The study, commissioned by Oxfam, the Trade Union Congress and Labour Behind the Label, focused on the working conditions in Bulgaria, Cambodia, Thailand, China, Indonesia and Turkey.

Suppliers to sportswear companies Nike, Adidas, Puma and Umbro were among those examined.

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

"The industry is sacrificing human rights in the search for profits. Should the race to [outfit] athletes mean a race to the bottom for these workers?"

Brendan Barber, the general secretary of the Trade Union Congress, says the sweatshop conditions are inconsistent with Olympic ideals.

"The Olympic Games are supposed to be a showcase for fairness and human achievement," he said. "But the sportswear industry is violating that spirit by exploiting and abusing workers rights."

Some of the sportswear manufacturers reacted well to the study. Nike said it welcomed it and was working to improve conditions. Adidas says it already has a labour standards policy in place. But Puma said it was skeptical of Oxfam's findings.

Former Canadian Olympian Bruce Kidd, who was active in the anti-apartheid athletic movement in the 1960s, was approached by Oxfam to take part in the campaign.

Kidd has addressed the issue of using equipment made in sweatshops in the past. During his tenure as dean of physical education at the University of Toronto, a code of conduct was created for clothes and equipment that bears the school's name.

And Kidd believes it's essential that International Olympic Committee takes similar steps to ensure the equipment used by athletes during the Games are produced ethically.

"This is an issue it has got to address," said Kidd in an interview with CBC Sports Online. "In the last 10 years, the IOC has taken enormous strides to ensure that the environment in which Games take place is preserved through sustainable practices.

"The issue is about the social environment of sport."

Kidd also thinks Olympic athletes, some of whom endure their own financial hardships, would understand in a small way what some of these exploited workers are going through.

"I think that athletes will be sympathetic to others who are struggling to make ends meet – they know what it's like to struggle themselves."

with files from Canadian Press

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