

Human Rights Groups Target Sportswear Giants

As the world looks to Portugal and Euro 2004, organizations campaigning against sweatshop conditions for workers making sportswear in developing countries are stepping up the pressure.

It's warming up to be the biggest clash of the European Championships but it won't be contested on the field of play but in the marketplace and it won't be the soccer skills of those involved that will win the game but the moral standards of those who watch it.

The giants of the sportswear world are going head-to-head with charities and human rights organisations in a battle for the hearts and minds of consumers. On one side are the mega-money galacticos of Adidas, Nike, Reebok and Puma who have pulled out all their marketing stops to persuade shoppers to snap up Euro 2004-branded merchandise without them worrying about the ethical problems surrounding the lives of the factory workers who made it. In opposition are the shoestring players of non-governmental organisations such as Oxfam, the Clean Clothes Campaign and Global Unions who are accusing the labels of violating the rights of millions of workers in favour of huge profits during the soccer showpiece in Portugal and the upcoming Olympic Games in Athens later this summer. The global market for sportswear goods is estimated to generate at least (\$58 billion) per year.

With the European Championships already underway, the charities are stepping up their campaigns as the world's eyes turn to these international sporting events. "Problems are endemic in this industry. We've been shocked by very low wages and long working hours," Adrie Papma, who heads the workers rights project, recently told reporters. "Workers are being pushed to the limit so that firms can get their goods on the shelves in time."

Eighteen hours a day

The organizations have compiled a report on the state of working conditions which cites examples such as an Indonesian factory where workers took home \$99 per month, covering only half of basic living costs, and where employees worked 16 to 18 hours a day, six days in a row. The publication of the report comes as nearly half a million people flood into Portugal for Euro 2004, many looking for branded souvenirs to commemorate their involvement in Europe's largest soccer event.

As a result, the sports companies have gone on the defensive in a bid to protect the huge amounts of business they expect to garner from a bumper period of sporting activity. The firms, who manufacture in developing countries to keep costs down, now face an embarrassing resurrection of a long-running debate which regularly generates tough questions and occasional protests at annual shareholders' meetings.

The big guns such as Nike, Reebok, Adidas, Puma and Umbro all have fixed rules on wages, working conditions and the age of workers. They insist that they carry out random checks on factory floors to check that codes of conduct are being enforced.

"Our day-to-day work is going to the factories unannounced and checking standards," said Reiner Hengstmann, Puma's global head of social and

environmental affairs in response to the claims, adding that Puma had seven employees doing the spot checks. "We don't have child labor as a problem. We deal with hours of work, overtime and wages."

Umbro, which provides playing and training equipment for the England and Sweden teams and a number of domestic league sides across the continent, also moved to smother human rights concerns by issuing its own statement: "The factory in China which makes the England replica kit is of an incredibly high standard and is the envy of many in the industry," the statement read.

Reality gap

The two sides, however, agree on one thing: there can be a big gap between written codes and the reality of factory life. Frank Henke, Adidas's director of social and environmental affairs, told reporters earlier this month that more than half of its suppliers did not meet what he called "best practice". He added: "We will not work with such firms unless they show they are improving their record."

Another area where the rules and standards are difficult to enforce is that of under-age workers and the proving of employees' ages. Nike, the global leader in sports shoes manufacture, has insisted on previous occasions that company officials insist that workers must be 16 in its clothing factories and 18 in footwear factories but says this goal can be hindered by false age records and younger workers already employed by a new supplier.

The human rights groups have conceded that since the big companies have introduced their own standards, there has been progress made, albeit very slow progress. And despite their protests, there is one thing the charities cannot dispute: the controversial factories which turn out the merchandise for sporting events like Euro 2004 are a lifeline both for the workers and entire countries.

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