

Telegraph Today – July 12, 2004

## **Olympics: Workers who share different kind of dream**

By Kate Hoey

Many people cheering the [Olympic torch on its journey through London](#) recently will have felt that they were sharing in the Olympic dream. As one woman said to me in Brixton as she watched her child dressed in carnival costume dancing to the beat of a steel band: "When I watch the Games in Athens in my front room I will now know that I have played a part."

To be part of the biggest sporting event in the world is the dream of every aspiring athlete. Olympians recall the friendships they made in the Olympic Village, and even millionaire athletes feel gripped by the spirit of togetherness and fair play.

But as the torch has moved from one continent to the next other events have been organised to highlight the fact that some sportswear companies who wish to be associated with the Olympic ideals cannot guarantee their products have been produced without contravening universal ethical principles.

This scandal is a cloud over the Olympics which the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and national Olympic committees have tried to down play or ignore. The Olympic Charter is full of fine words such as the Olympic ideal seeking "to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example, and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles".

Sadly the practices of some sportswear companies violate the spirit and the letter of the Charter.

Play Fair at the Olympics (PFAO) is a broadly based international campaign comprising Oxfam, the Clean Clothes Network and global unions such as the TUC. The aim is to challenge the IOC and, in the UK, the British Olympic Association (BOA) to help end exploitation of workers, predominately women, who make the goods we all wear.

In their recent hard-hitting report based on secret interviews with 186 workers from Cambodia, China, Bulgaria, Indonesia, Thailand and Turkey the reality of abysmally low wages, excessively long hours, bullying, and physical and verbal abuse is documented. Some of the interviews are harrowing. Mara, a 25-year-old female Cambodian garment worker, sews products in Phnom Penh to support her widowed mother and six siblings.

She has a target of 120 garments an hour for which she earns around \$1.25. In an average working day she has to sew 960 pairs and, if she fails, her monthly incentive bonus of \$5 is cut. If she works all her overtime shifts she will take home around \$60 (£32) per month. Corporate profits in this industry are created at the expense of the dignity, health and safety of vulnerable women with attempts to organise the workforce forbidden.

Of course, some of the global brands do pronounce their commitment to decent labour practices and even have codes of conduct. A few take part in meetings with the International Labour Organisation. But, as the report shows, some of the purchasing practices used by their

buyers in their supply-chains are open to question. The suppliers are pressurised to deliver goods speedily and flexibly, continually pushed to lower unit prices to squeeze the profit margin, with always the threat of losing the contract.

The Olympic `family' do make money from the production of sportswear. Through their licensing programme they act like any other company who give licences. Women producing branded Olympic goods should have rights and the IOC should be making sure those rights are protected. After ignoring requests to meet with the PFAO, the IOC eventually did and were presented with the campaign proposals.

But then a follow-up meeting was cancelled and in May the IOC sent a response saying they had been working with the World Federation of Sporting Goods Industry to ensure `their operations satisfy the highest ethical standards in the global market place'. Then they passed the buck to the national committees saying it was they who managed day-to-day licensing and that the IOC have "no direct involvement with regards to such contracts".

So although the IOC condemn unfair labour practices they fail to acknowledge any responsibility to sort out abuses despite having direct relationships with some sportswear companies at a global level. In addition, the national Olympic committees work with many more sportswear companies who have direct relationships with the Olympic movement. Those companies all need permission to use the Olympic logo and this right belongs exclusively to the IOC.

Ironically, this year the IOC have invested huge resources to promote the Olympic values, even working with Nelson Mandela on the "Humanity" campaign. However, when companies with whom they have a direct

contractual relationship undermine these Olympic values they say it is nothing to do with them while at the same time national Olympic committees maintain it is the IOC who need to act.

The BOA have met with the Play Fair campaign but not yet made any commitment of their active support for reform in the global sports industry. They could, and hopefully will, do more.

The Olympic movement have enormous power and influence throughout the world. If the IOC insisted they would only deal with companies who could guarantee international labour standards for their work-force the impact would be immense. Then, perhaps, garment workers like Mara would all be able to share in the Olympic dream.

*<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/main.jhtml?xml=/sport/2004/07/12/sohoey12.xml>*