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Sportswear firms to investigate Oxfam sweatshop claims

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Sportswear made by Puma, Umbro, Fila, Adidas, Reebok, Nike and ASICS is being produced by workers around the world whose rights are being regularly violated, according to a major report by Oxfam and trade unions.

As the big brands gear up to take advantage of the marketing around the Olympic games, most are using factories that ruthlessly exploit their workers, the charity claims. It says that the business methods of the leading companies, which have cut order times and reduced prices paid to their suppliers, have resulted in workers being forced into excessively long overtime, sometimes unpaid, and given wages too low to live on.

The report, *Play Fair at the Olympics*, has been prepared by Oxfam in conjunction with Labour Behind the Label and international trade unions, and is based on interviews with workers producing sports clothes and trainers in seven countries. As well as evidence from the traditional garment-producing countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, China, Cambodia and Bangladesh, research was collected in Bulgaria and Turkey.

Brendan Barber, secretary general of the TUC, 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. We want the companies to talk to us so we can work together for workers in the industry."

The international director of Oxfam, Jasmine Whitbread, called on the companies involved to change the way they do business. "The majority of workers in the sportswear industry are women whose health, children and family life are suffering from long hours, poor working conditions and low pay."

According to the report, long working hours and forced overtime were the main concerns of the workers. In peak seasons, seven-day working is becoming the norm. In some factories 16 to 18 hours without proper breaks is common.

The report gives a catalogue of examples involving suppliers to most of the main brands. In two Chinese factories producing for Umbro, workers said they were all made to work a seven-day week. In a Bangkok garment factory producing for Fila, Nike and Puma, workers described having to work through the night.

In four Turkish factories producing for Fila, Puma and other smaller fashion brands, workers all reported being forced to work overtime. In a Bulgarian factory supplying Puma, refusal to do overtime is often used as a pretext for dismissing the worker.

Many factories were employing workers without proper contracts, and denying them the legal minimum wage, or statutory overtime payments and sickness allowances, researchers reported. A garment worker on a temporary contract in a factory in Indonesia supplying Nike, Adidas, Fila and Puma, said that wages were dependent on meeting targets, which they had to work overtime without pay to complete. Workers at a Cambodian factory producing sportswear for Adidas and Puma had pay and monthly bonuses deducted if they took a day off sick.

At a subcontracted factory in Indonesia making sportswear bearing the Olympics emblem, workers say they are sometimes forced to work shifts as long as 17 hours and often six days in a row. They say they are exhausted and that many pregnant women suffer miscarriages. Women workers often reported sexual harassment. At an Indonesian factory making clothes for Nike, Puma, Adidas, Fila and ASICS, for example, women workers complained that they were fondled and harassed by male supervisors.

In response to previous allegations of exploitation in the sportswear industry, the main companies have adopted codes of practice with their suppliers. Oxfam says its interviews show that these have led to limited improvements but that there is often a gap between their ethical commitments and their purchasing practices.

The intense competition between companies to deliver constantly changing fashion at ever-lower prices has been fed down the line to put pressure on suppliers. They in turn have responded by pushing their workers to work faster and longer and by keeping their wages down, the report says.

In the last five years, the price of trainers and sports clothes has fallen by 10% or more. Factory managers claimed that buyers from the big brands used the threat of relocating to force prices down.

The traditional system of placing bulk orders for four basic seasons has been replaced by "just-in-time" ordering. Fashions now change by the month. Factories that fail to meet the deadlines on orders said they faced fines or higher freight charges. Some suppliers simply cheat the inspectors when they are being audited for the big brands.

Adidas said it was studying the report carefully and was committed to continuous improvement. "We have a code of conduct in place which requires our suppliers to comply with core labour standards. We have an international team of 30 people who monitor our factories. Independent monitors verify the effectiveness of our monitoring efforts," it said in a statement yesterday.

Umbro said it could not comment on the report. ASICS and Fila UK said they were studying the findings.

Nike said it welcomed the report and added that it was working to improve conditions with independent groups such as the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities. Nike employs more than 80 people to check compliance with its codes of practice and its buying was now being done on a "balanced scorecard approach", which means that compliance with the codes is included.

Puma said it was initially sceptical of the findings on its sourcing activities and would investigate further. It has had a detailed code of conduct on working conditions and labour rights since 1993.

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