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The fight for Olympic fair play

Oxfam organizes worldwide protest against sweatshop Olympic apparel

-By Alex Bill-

Last Thursday, St. John's was one of 25 international cities where protestors demonstrated against sweatshop labour, specifically targeting sports companies using the Olympic logo on apparel.

Oxfam recently released a report studying the practices of sports companies such as Nike, Adidas, Reebok, Puma, Fila, Mizuno, Kappa, and Umbro in several different countries, such as China, Bulgaria, Turkey, Indonesia, and Cambodia.

In Scotia Square on Water Street, demonstrators wore Olympic-style running shirts and held up a clothesline with different forms of clothing attached. "The symbol of the washing line [is that] you must clean up your act," said Bill Hynd, Oxfam organizer of the event.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) also supported Oxfam in this endeavour. Nancy Rich, a retired CLC member, believes if the public takes notice, things will change. "Public awareness for private companies should never be underestimated. If, in fact, you got this campaign, [and] that, around the world, people said, 'We're not buying Nike,' they'd have to move. Like the world did on South African apartheid."

For decades, the public goal of the Olympics was to unite people through sport and support human rights. Sport companies using sweatshop labour to produce their goods is an old concept, but knowing that the Olympics have agreed to place the logo on sweatshop apparel has pushed Oxfam to make their campaign public.

"What we're pressuring for right now is to say, as the international Olympics committee, you actually can make a difference. You can build into those contractual arrangements, saying that you want a guarantee from the sportswear industry that peoples' rights will be respected," said Linda Ross, an Oxfam member. "This is the opportunity to do that."

The problem with placing any direct blame on the Olympics or the individual companies comes from their ability to shift the blame to smaller subsidiaries. Companies are able to evade certain laws and regulations by contracting out work rather than producing it in their own factories. Although this may clear them from any wrongdoing, it is not good enough for Hynd and Oxfam. "They're saying, 'Look at our words.' We're saying, 'Look at the reality.'"

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) can also shift the blame from itself. They claim it is the responsibility of the 200-plus national Olympic committees to decide who can use the logo and on what items. Avoiding the main problem does not satisfy Hynd. "If you go to their website and you go to their charter, they're the ones

responsible for making sure their charter is implemented and for taking control of the logo, the anthems, anything to do with it,” he said. “Where the buck stops is the IOC.”

Although the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) was unavailable for official comment, a representative did say that Roots Canada, the official supplier of Canadian Olympic apparel, made their products in Canada under suitable working conditions. Hynd also stated the chairman of the COC was sympathetic to their cause, and that their marketing manager was “quite upset” with the sweatshop sportswear.

Some of the accused companies have also taken note of the protests. “The companies have started responding,” said Hynd. “Some of them have said they were going to look into the allegations.”

There has never truly been an end in sight for sweatshop labour, despite recent sweatshop bans by various organizations, entire cities, such as New York City, and university campuses, like Memorial. “People are taken advantage of who live in very poor areas,” said one protestor. “The companies win and the workers lose, and as soon as there’s another place with cheaper labour, they’ll move.”

This is why Hynd and Oxfam have made the push to influence the IOC to do what they believe is the right thing. “They say, ‘We do not want anyone on drugs to enhance their ability to run.’ Well, we’re saying ‘We don’t want anyone to perform with gear that’s made under sweatshop conditions.’”

<http://www.mun.ca/muse/sports/index.php?articleid=2041>