

NY takes stand against sweatshop abuses

by Amanda Cedrone

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New York is siding with workers' rights groups in the fight against sweatshop abuses by joining other states and cities that have become members of the nationwide Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium.

Gov. David A. Paterson announced Dec. 11 the state had joined the coalition of state and local governments that are working together to implement and enforce sweatshop-free standards for apparel suppliers.

In a letter to advocates, Paterson wrote, "I believe that the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium will serve as a crucial tool in creating and maintaining standards of workplace fairness and safety in our global economy ... It is vital that states and local governments do their part to prevent a 'race to the bottom.'"

The next step is to have the state Office of General Services work with the consortium to create a code of conduct for New York that apparel suppliers must abide by in order to qualify for state contracts, said Jordan Wells, sweatshop-free coordinator for the Labor-Religion Coalition of New York state. The coalition is made up of religious and workers' groups that fight collaboratively for economic justice.

Each member of the consortium creates an individual code of conduct, but the consortium provides a model code available for review online at buysweatfree.org/resources.

Once the code of conduct is established, resources of the member states will be pooled in order to efficiently monitor factories around the world that supply apparel to member states.

"The idea is to address rampant sweatshop abuses," said Wells. "The commitment with the governor was a tremendously important step, but the next step will be introducing and implementing action in sweatshops."

Other members include Maine, Pennsylvania and the cities of Ashland, Ore.; Austin, Tex.; Milwaukee, Portland, Ore.; and San Francisco. Together, these

entities procure more than \$50 million in apparel annually.

Previous reports by SweatFree Communities, an organization that coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in labor-intensive industries, have exposed sweatshop conditions in apparel factories supplying New York.

These findings included obligatory pregnancy tests, blacklisting of union supporters, poverty wages, forced and unpaid overtime, horrendous safety conditions and child labor.

Eagle, a New York supplier of tactical gear in New Bedford, Mass. closed in July. Elisa Rios, a former Eagle employee, said, "Harassment, fear, desperation, sadness, unhappiness, tears — this is what we experienced daily in the factory."

New Bedford Tactical Gear, a new government contractor, opened following Eagle's closure and workers have voted in favor of a union contract that provides for pay increases, a pension, affordable health insurance and more.

"We need the help of elected officials to make sure more work comes to plants like New Bedford to put more people back to work and spend our tax dollars to support fair working conditions," said Dino Neves, a cutter for New Bedford Tactical Gear.

Anti-sweatshop advocates celebrated the governor's announcement.

"New York joining the consortium marks a huge victory against the sweatshop conditions that continue to plague apparel factories supplying our state," said Brian O'Shaughnessy, executive director of the Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State. "We are eager to work with OGS and the Department of Labor to enact a sweat-free code of conduct for state apparel suppliers."

Bruce Raynor, president of the Workers United SEIU union, said, "Gov. Paterson's decision to have New York state join the consortium marks an important victory against the sweatshop conditions that many apparel workers face each day."

Mitch Cahn, president of Unionwear, the parent company of New Bedford Tactical Gear, said, "New York's role in the Sweatfree Consortium is a game-changer for domestic factories that respect worker rights, because we will not have to compete with sweatshops for New York state's considerable purchasing power in the garment industry."