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Rocky Shoes sweatshop abuses shed light on failed trade model amid primary contest

Unrest at footwear factory exposes consequences of NAFTA-style trade deals as presidential candidates make appeals to displaced Ohio manufacturing workers

Columbus, Ohio --- Human rights and labor organizations in Ohio today called on presidential candidates and Governor Ted Strickland to adopt "sweatfree" purchasing policies to stop tax dollar support for sweatshop abuses that have sent thousands of Ohio jobs overseas. The call comes as the groups exposed workplace abuses in a Rocky Shoes-contracted facility in China, where as many as 4000 workers went on strike last month to protest non-payment of wages.

Rocky Shoes & Boots, based in Nelsonville, shut down its unionized manufacturing plant there in 2001. The company, which sells shoes and boots to government departments for municipal employees, postal service workers, and the military, now manufactures the majority of its products in China and the Dominican Republic, paying workers a fraction of the wages they used to pay in Nelsonville.

Reports from Chinese newspapers indicate that as many as 4000 workers at the Quan Tak factory in Guangzhou went on strike to recover unpaid overtime wages going as far back as 2002. Employees often work 15 hours a day, seven days a week, for as little as \$5 a day. Workers also said that they are trained to deceive monitors that Quan Tak corporate clients send to inspect workplace conditions and that workers who led efforts to improve conditions were fired.

"These used to be good Ohio jobs," said Wanda Taylor, who made shoes in the Nelsonville factory for 25 years and served as the president of UNITE local 146SW. "Now we know the consequences of NAFTA-style trade agreements: Ohio workers lose their jobs, and overseas workers are forced to work without pay. It's a lose-lose situation that's got to change."

The human rights and labor organizations today said that their expectation is that when problems like these arise in factories that produce goods for Rocky Shoes in China, the Dominican Republic, or elsewhere, the company will ensure that the problems are fixed and working conditions improve, rather than abandon the factories in question.

To address ongoing problems, the emerging State and Local Government Sweatfree Consortium will pool resources of state and local governments and school districts for independent investigations of working conditions in common supplier factories, and consolidate government purchasing power in factories where workers are treated with dignity and respect. The goal of the

Consortium is to create a significant market for good working conditions that will benefit workers both in Ohio and overseas. The States of New York, Pennsylvania, and Maine are currently leading the Consortium effort.

"Ohio voters want to know that our next president will put an end to the type of trade deals that have made life harder for American workers and workers overseas," said Karen Hansen of the Ohio Conference on Fair Trade. "If Senators Clinton and Obama stand by their statements to end NAFTA-style trade deals, then they'll endorse the Sweatfree Consortium. Our tax dollars should not be spent on shoes and boots that are made in sweatshops."

"Governor Strickland can be a leader by joining other cities and states that have committed to the Sweatfree Consortium," said Victoria Kaplan, Midwest regional organizer for SweatFree Communities. "Before he was Ohio's chief executive, Governor Strickland represented the people of Nelsonville in Congress. He should know better than anyone how important it is to stand up for good jobs."

Translations of Chinese newspaper articles on the strike at Rocky Shoes supplier Quan Tak are available below. Additional resources, including photographs, are available by contacting Victoria Kaplan at 574-975-6207 or vicki@sweatfree.org.

SweatFree Communities coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries by working with both public and religious institutions to adopt sweatshop-free purchasing policies. Using institutional purchasing as a lever for worker justice, the sweatfree movement empowers ordinary people to create a just global economy through local action. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org

The Ohio Conference on Fair Trade is a statewide coalition of faith, labor, environmental, family farm, community and social justice organizations advocating for fair and just trade policies. Learn more at www.ohiofairtrade.org

UNITE HERE is a labor union representing 450,000 workers in the garment, apparel, laundry, hotel, restaurant, and gaming, industries in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Learn more at www.unitehere.org

The State and Local Government Sweatfree Consortium, comprised of states, cities, counties, local government agencies, and school districts, as well as human rights advocates and labor rights experts, will pool resources of public entities to investigate working conditions in factories that make uniforms and other products for public employees. Cities and states will hold vendors to the same standards, use the same independent monitor for enforcement, and create a market large enough to persuade companies to deal responsibly and ethically with their suppliers and workers. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org/sweatfreeconsortium

The following are unofficial translations of articles published in the Chinese press on January 10, 2008 regarding the wildcat strike at Quan Tak Footwear Company Limited, a factory producing for Ohio-based company Rocky Shoes.

http://epaper.nddaily.com/G/html/2008-01/10/content_363066.htm

5 Years of Uncompensated Sunday Overtime

4000 Workers from a company on Shisha Road block the street to protest; Baiyun District Labor Department comes to intervene; high level management talk things over

January 10, 2008

Yesterday afternoon at 12:45 pm, approximately 4000 workers from the Quan Tak Footwear Company Limited (herein referred to as "Quan Tak") took to the streets at Guangzhou's Shisha Road to fight for their overtime compensation. Staff from the Baiyun Labor and Social Security Department came to intervene. At 4:40 pm, after negotiating with high level management, workers returned to the factory and traffic on Shisha road could once again run unimpeded.

According to workers, the factory has embezzled 2-4 hours of workers wages and overtime compensation every day since 2002. Workers typically have to work on Sundays without any salary or overtime compensation.

Workers take to the streets to demand overtime pay

Quan Tak Company, located at 289 Shisha Road in Guangzhou, is a subsidiary of the Taiwanese Enterprise Shing Tak Footwear Group Limited and employs more than 4000 workers. Yesterday at 3 pm, thousands of this company's workers, wearing their blue uniforms, gathered on Shisha road in front of the factory gate. Workers stated that all of the more than 4000 workers had taken the streets at 12:45 pm to express their discontent over embezzlement of wages and overtime compensation.

One factory worker said that the factory announced three months ago that the entirety of Quan Tak would be moved to Dongguan and that all the workers could also follow the factory to Dongguan. The majority of workers was unwilling to go and requested that the factory pay their unpaid wages and overtime compensation, going back to 2002. But several months have passed and the factory has so far not replied, engendering discontent amongst the workers.

When the factory has orders, the workers receive no rest on the weekends

According to workers, Quan Tak has required them to work until 10 pm or midnight every day since 2002. Not only does the factory not pay overtime compensation for those 2-4 hours, workers are not even paid their normal wage.

A worker in the logistics department (responsible for attendance and wage calculation and payment) revealed that Quan Tak has a punch card system to keep track of working hours. But every day, around 8 or 8:10 pm, the factory stops the punch card machine. The workers, however, are not allowed to leave work and must continue to work until at least 10 pm, and sometimes until midnight. Hours of work during this time period are not recorded and workers are not paid.

This worker stated that workers normally do not get any rest days. If the factory has orders, workers must work on Saturday and Sunday. The workers do not receive overtime compensation for Saturday work and they do not receive wages or overtime compensation for their work on Sundays.

The worker also took out a December shift schedule and punch card report. Although the punch card record showed that the worker had worked all four Sundays, the shift schedule was blank.

"We can only rest when the factory does not have orders," the worker said. Yesterday afternoon, reporters on the scene conducted random interviews with workers and confirmed the above.

Top management says they don't understand the situation

Yesterday afternoon, a number of high-level company managers came out to the courtyard to persuade workers to return to the factory, requesting that the workers elect a representative to discuss matters with the company, but they encountered chants of refusal from the workers. The workers said that they had already voiced their concerns repeatedly [to management] but almost 3 months had passed without even a response.

The Baiyun District Labor and Social Security Department and the Baiyun police force soon arrived on the scene and persuaded the workers to leave the street and return to the factory for a negotiation. At 4:40 pm, the workers finally agreed to return to the factory. There was a traffic jam in Shisha Road until normal traffic flow resumed approximately 4 hours later.

At 4:30 pm, a reporter found a Quan Tak top level manager, Mr. Zhou. He said he personally could not understand why workers had suddenly left the factory to block the road so he would not respond until after management negotiated with worker representatives and he understood the situation. The person on-site from the Baiyun District Labor and Social Security Department accepted interviews from reporters, saying that the Labor Department would successfully resolve the workers' concerns.

http://www.ycwb.com/ycwb/2008-01/10/content_1750952.htm

Quan Tak Shoe Factory: 2000 Workers Leave Their Work Stations to Collectively Demand Overtime Pay

Jin Yang Online 2008-01-10 15:02:00

Relevant Baiyun District Departments Come to Mediate

News Report. Video correspondent Cai Xia reports: Yesterday afternoon this newspaper received word that approximately 2000 workers collectively left their work stations at a factory in Baiyun District, Shijing Town. Would they see yet another year end with a delay in their salary? We understand that in fact [the protest] was to demand payment of unpaid "overtime compensation".

Yesterday afternoon at 3:00 pm, our reporter arrived near the Quan Tak Shoe Factory in Baiyun District, Shijing Town, Shisha Road. On the spacious factory campus nearly 2000 workers gathered. It was said that the reason they were gathered and not working was because of dissatisfaction with the company's lack of transparency in the payment of overtime compensation.

A woman worker stated that she has worked in the factory for three years and has to work seven days almost every week. "Here we have absolutely no weekend at all, we have to work on Saturdays and Sundays but even Sundays don't count as overtime. We must show up!" For example, she works from 7:20 am to 11:00 pm and never understands why the punch card only shows 9.5 or fewer hours per day. "If we are late even once we are fined 50 yuan and if we are absent we are fined 90 yuan. Plus, we will not receive our end of the month attendance bonus [if we are late or absent]. We never see our wage slips. How is our monthly wage of approximately 1100 yuan even calculated? Where did our overtime compensation go?"

The workers did not receive a satisfactory response and shortly thereafter blocked the Human Resources Department manager. Manager Zhu politely expressed that the workers should elect representatives to talk things over with company management. "If you have an opinion you may state it but having all of you surrounding me will not be useful at all. Since the government has

arrived on the street, just sending a delegate in to talk with us should be good, ok?" However, by 5 pm the workers were still unwilling to select representatives. A staff person from the Baiyun District Shijing Town Labor and Social Security Department continued to urge the workers: "You need a worker representative to gather everyone's grievances and only after that will we be able to talk."

Workers called out comments, like: "Who would dare to be a representative?! Those who took the lead in the past were all fired." Finally, when the reporter was leaving, the workers began to reach a consensus and decided to select representatives to resolve the situation.