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# Students Confront Sweatshops

With a new wave of activism against sweatshops sweeping college campuses, student interest in the morality of their clothing choices can set a standard for the rest of us.

**Peter Dreier and Richard Appelbaum** November 9, 2005 | This article appeared in the November 28, 2005 edition of *The Nation*.

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At Columbia University in September, twenty-four students marched to president Lee Bollinger's office, chanted "Hey, hey, Prez Bo, sweatshop labor's got to go," and left a cupcake as a gift. At the University of Michigan activists ran a mock sweatshop, then went to president Mary Sue Coleman's office with a list of demands to end the university's purchase of clothing made in sweatshops. At the University of California, Riverside, students held a sweatshop fashion show to raise awareness of conditions for garment workers.

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In the next four years—and beyond—progressives must create the political space for the president to

A new wave of campus activism against sweatshops is sweeping colleges across the country. Students had barely returned to school this fall when more than forty

campuses—including Duke, Kansas State, Brown, Loyola, Berkeley and the universities of Indiana, Michigan and Connecticut—were hit by demonstrations organized by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS).

Universities purchase about \$3 billion in T-shirts, sweatshirts, caps, sneakers and sports uniforms adorned with their institutions' names and logos. The clothing is designed under licensing arrangements by companies like Nike, Reebok, Champion and Russell, which outsource their production to factories around the world. For example, the University of North Carolina earns more than \$2.9 million annually by farming out its logo to more than 500 licensees that produce clothing in factories in Mexico, Central America, Asia and elsewhere.

Since 1998, when Duke students took over the university president's office, some 200 colleges have adopted antisweatshop codes of conduct. They typically require licensees to use factories that pay a living wage, follow adequate labor standards and allow workers to form independent unions.

While some well-publicized gains have been made—including recognition of employee-run unions in some factories, limits on mandatory and unpaid overtime and a decline in sexual harassment of female employees—these codes of conduct have proved difficult to enforce. Major brands make clothing for the college market in thousands of factories around the world, and their college-bound goods are only a small fraction of total production, making it difficult to hold them accountable.

"The codes are just empty promises unless universities back up their commitment with enforceable standards that brands have to live up to," said Zack Knorr, a student



represent the majority of Americans.

leader at the University of California, Riverside.

**Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen**

Moreover, the thirty-year-old apparel quota system, which had set strict limits on the quantity of apparel different countries could export to the United States and Europe, ended January 1. Companies can now roam the world to find the cheapest manufacturing. For most companies that means China, where wages are low and independent unions are illegal.

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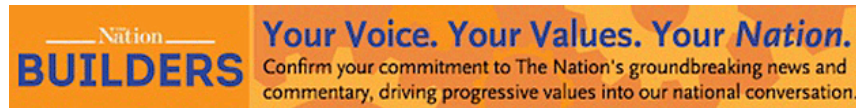
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