

# No Sweat With Alta Gracia Apparel

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*Alta Gracia Apparel, a U.S.-owned factory in Latin America, marries profit and workers' rights*

By Peter Dreier, from The Nation

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Joseph Bozich, CEO of Knights Apparel, and Mireya Perez, a union leader

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Aracelis "Kuky" Upia, a 39-year-old factory worker in the Dominican Republic, is participating in an experiment that, if it is successful, could help end sweatshops as a staple of the global economy.

A single mother of four, Upia has been sewing in factories since she was 15. For years she earned less than \$50 a week. Some employers simply refused to pay her. At one point she was so in debt that the local market stopped extending her credit.

Today, Upia sews T-shirts for \$2.85 an hour, a leap in income and nearly three times the country's

minimum wage. She has paid off her loans and can grocery shop again. She has purchased a refrigerator, plans to add rooms to her home to rent out for additional income, and has paid for her son Nisael's long-postponed dental work.

Upia was among the first workers hired by Alta Gracia Apparel, an apparel factory named after the town where she has lived all her life that produces T-shirts and sweatshirts for U.S. colleges for prices similar to Nike's.

One of 120 nonmanagement employees—mostly sewing-machine operators, but also cutters, packers, and maintenance staff—Upia earns not only a living wage, but also at least 35 percent overtime for more than 44 hours of work a week, and more on weekends and holidays.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, students on American campuses pressured universities to adopt “codes of conduct” as a condition of allowing companies to use their names and logos. Implementing these standards was difficult, however. College-bound goods are only a small fraction of the products made by the thousands of apparel factories worldwide, and monitoring all these workplaces is next to impossible.

For years, campus groups like United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) refused to support companies claiming to be “sweatshop-free,” because they couldn't be sure the companies would keep their commitment. Today, USAS, as well as the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), which was founded in 2000 to help enforce the codes drafted in the '90s, believe Alta Gracia Apparel proves that socially responsible clothing production is not only possible; it's profitable.

“Surveys consistently show that 80 percent of consumers would be willing to pay a little more for a no-sweat product,” says Columbia University law professor Mark Barenberg. “The problem is that they haven't had reliable information that there are factories that meet those standards. Alta Gracia is a game changer.”

Alta Gracia resulted from a collaboration between labor rights advocates, student activists, and Joe Bozich, CEO of Knights Apparel, which dominates the nation's \$4 billion college clothing market. In 2005 Scott Nova, WRC's executive director, contacted Bozich to alert him that a company Knights Apparel had just acquired was doing business with a factory in the Philippines whose workers complained about labor violations.