

Response to Beijing Olympicsâ€™™ Organizing Committee statement on labour rights violations

Thursday, 02 August 2007

Freedom of Association is the key.

Play Fair 2008, the international campaign organized by ITUC*, ITGLWF *, the Clean Clothes Campaign and their affiliates and partners worldwide, appreciates the fact that BOCOG and the Chinese authorities have acted upon its "No Medal for Olympics on Labour Rights" report. BOCOG has confirmed widespread use of overtime for three of the suppliers, and the use of underage workers as well as contract violations at the fourth, Lekit Stationary. In addition to obligatory excessive overtime our report however also provides detailed evidence of workers being underpaid (for overtime as well as regular working hours), of health and safety regulations being ignored, dubious hiring practices, lack of legal maternity leave and a structural lack of safe channels for workers to report their grievances.

Regrettably the BOCOG statement ignores these issues, despite several major international customers having acknowledged that these problems are prevalent in the factories. "Our findings on wages, health and safety, hiring practices and other issues show that the problems run much deeper" says the Playfair group, "and we call upon BOCOG and the IOC to publish the full report and discuss further action to genuinely improve the workers' situation". We are also disappointed that the BOCOG investigation findings have not mentioned compensation or redress for the underpaid workers. To our surprise the IOC so far has failed to comment on the BOCOG report, nor have undertaken any practical action to ensure the problems are addressed at will not occur elsewhere. "This is not a problem limited to China" says the Playfair group. Several sportswear brands, have confirmed that the findings our report focus on issues which they have identified for improvement throughout their entire supply chains.

Playfair 2008 has repeatedly called upon the IOC and BOCOG not to "cut and run" from these factories, but to take positive action to improve conditions and involve stakeholders, including labour support groups, in the process. We are saddened that BOCOG has decided to cut ties with one of the companies, Lekit, instead of working with the company and Playfair 2008 to improve the situation. As indicated in our report, we believe these four factories to be the rule not just for other Olympics licensees but the sector as a whole, and as far as Lekit is concerned, our follow up research would suggest that the company's practice in respect of employing schoolchildren is just the tip of an iceberg in China. See: www.playfair2008.org/docs/Child_labour_July_2007.pdf

With respect to the three suspended companies, BOCOG states that they have to "rectify their operations in accordance with the Labour Bureau's requirements", but provides no detail on what these requirements are, or how workers themselves will be able to effectively participate, and ultimately benefit from action taken on their behalf.

We are unconvinced by BOCOG's statement that it attaches great importance to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) issues. A decade of experience has led the PlayFair groups, and many other observers in industry as well as government, to the conclusion that it is vital that workers themselves are at the heart of any efforts to improve their working conditions. For Playfair 2008, the starting point has to be confidential and accessible means for workers to report violations, and training and information for workers on their rights at work.

"Sustainable improvements across global supply chains will only be achievable if workers can freely represent their own interests, through organizations of their own choice, that is through independent trade unions" states the Playfair group. "Failure to recognize and respect the rights to freedom of association and to collective bargaining, widely recognized as enabling rights, will mean that future violations will inevitably occur". Once again we call upon the IOC to take the lead and work with us to develop measures to avoid workers rights violations in the remaining Chinese licensee factories and beyond.

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Clean Clothes Campaign

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