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Wis. Activists Attack Kohl's Sweatshop Ties

By Roger Bybee

5 Kohl's Corp. continues to wear a poker face, claiming that it still holds a strong hand in the face of anti-sweatshop protests over the Chentex factory where its products are made in Nicaragua.

10 After workers at the Chentex plant in Nicaragua--who average just 48 cents an hour--sought 8 cents more for every piece of \$30 clothing they make for Kohl's, plant management fired about 300 workers and dozens were arrested. This has triggered protests against the Menominee Falls-based firm from religious, student, and labor groups in Milwaukee and Madison.

15 The protests escalated at the busy Southridge store in the Milwaukee suburb of Greendale, October 14. Four young anti-sweatshop activists were arrested at Kohl's after unfurling a banner calling upon Kohl's to "Do the Right Thing," chanting slogans, and distributing leaflets describing the situation in Nicaragua. They were handcuffed by Greendale police, and as they were led away, the young people began softly singing the civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome."

20 The arrests were the first to occur in Milwaukee-area protests which began last May and have been drawing in a wider circle of allies. The arrests captured prominent media attention and are likely to be a harbinger of more civil disobedience at Kohl's stores, as has taken place in Ann Arbor.

25 As a participant in the Southridge protest, I observed that almost all the Kohl's customers I approached with leaflets were interested and respectful. Other protesters also reported an unusually positive response. A Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article the next day similarly quoted supportive responses from two Kohl's customers. (Reflecting the fact that the Bill of Rights ends at the entrance to privately-owned malls, local TV stations declined to cover the protest inside Southridge, saying that their access as news-gatherers is
30 routinely denied at almost all area malls.)

Up until now, Kohl's has been sticking to its cards. Kohl's maintains that a PriceWaterhouseCoopers study "did not find that the workers were underpaid," and that it cannot "intercede" in labor relations in a plant it does not own.

35 However, along with the protest at Southridge, the corporation has been
dealt some other unfavorable cards in recent days:

- U.S. Trade Secretary Charlene Barshefsky wrote the Nicaraguan
government calling attention to labor disputes at the Chentex and Mil
Colores plants where Kohl's products are made. This kind of official
40 attention, especially coming from a trade official normally counted on to be
pro-corporate, considerably ups the ante. The Barshefsky letter became the
lead story in the Oct. 13 business section of the Journal Sentinel.

- The PriceWaterhouseCoopers report lost much of its public credibility when
MIT professor Dara O'Rourke discovered that the auditing company has
45 severe flaws in its factory-inspection practices.

O'Rourke, the September 28 New York Times reported, found that PWC "had
a pro-management bias, did not uncover the use of carcinogenic chemicals,
and failed to recognize that some employees were forced to work 80-hour
weeks."

50 Despite these developments, Kohl's remains stone-faced, claiming that it
enforces a code of conduct for Chentex and its contractors and that it is
conducting an investigation of the labor dispute.

However, corporate "human rights policies" have become empty, unenforced
tools to deflect protest over sweatshop conditions. At this point, such codes
55 of conduct are probably included on every software package that major
corporations buy. Nike, Reebok, and many of the other worst exploiters of
sweatshop labor all are able to hire lawyers who draft lofty-sounding but
toothless human-rights policies. But these policies generally have remained
encased in a frame back at corporate headquarters while the local contractor
60 in China, Indonesia, or Mexico continues to pay 20 to 60 cents an hour for
60-hour weeks, with silent approval of the controlling corporation.

And when somebody does insist that human-rights policies be taken
seriously, big corporations are not amused. After the University of Oregon
selected the Workers Rights Consortium rather than a more pliable
65 alternative to monitor conditions in the Third World factories where Nike
products are made, an infuriated Nike CEO Phil Knight tore up a \$30 million
check he had planned to give the university. Nike simply won't allow the
Workers Rights Consortium to handle the monitoring of its contractors'
factories.

70 As for investigating conditions in Nicaragua, Kohl's assigned Price-
WaterhouseCoopers to conduct a study. Besides noting that some safety

75 problems existed, the PWC report asserted that workers were "not underpaid," as a Kohl's representative told the Journal Sentinel. But Kohl's is refusing to make public the PWC report, according to Steve Watrous of the Wisconsin Fair Trade Campaign.

80 Moreover, Kohl's executives have shown a remarkable disinterest in talking first-hand to those who have observed conditions in Nicaragua. The corporation turned away a delegation including Detroit Archbishop Thomas Gumbleton, recently expelled from Nicaragua after visiting sweatshops producing for the U.S. market. At this point, Kohl's has spurned four opportunities to meet with delegations from Nicaragua.

85 Further, Sen. Herb Kohl, whose family formerly owned the department stores, wrote Kohl's on August 29 urging them to meet with groups challenging the sweatshop conditions, but no meeting has taken place. One may well question the sincerity of Kohl's commitment to a real investigation of conditions. Thus far, it seems to be about as intensive as O.J. Simpson's search for the "real killer" of Nicole.

90 However, escalating protests in Kohl's home territory and unwelcome attention from the U.S. trade representative may finally force the company to play its cards. Kohl's can hardly be happy about the prospect of a mounting wave of bad publicity as it heads toward the big Christmas shopping season.

95 Roger Bybee, former editor of Racine Labor, works with the Wisconsin Fair Trade Campaign and is the communications director of Wisconsin Citizen Action.

Wisconsin Activists Attack Kohl's Sweatshop Tie Worksheet.

Vocabulary Questions:

What is the most likely meaning for triggered as it is used in line 9:

- A. Shot
- B. Began
- C. Ended
- D. Laughed at

What is the most likely meaning for intercede as it is used in line 33:

- A. To act on behalf of a group or person
- B. Ignore
- C. Attack
- D. Pay

What is the most likely meaning for exploiters as it is used on line 55:

- A. Legal owners
- B. Provider
- C. One who uses someone else unfairly for profit
- D. Helper

Short Answer:

Why did the local TV stations refuse to cover the protest inside Southridge?

Were the Kohl's customers unusually supportive or were they uncaring/ disrespectful?

Why is it important that shoppers are supportive of the activists? How will this affect Kohl's policies/ actions?

Essay Question:

Why would the executives at Kohl's not want to speak to those who were in Nicaragua, and what effect might it have if they did?