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Sweatshop worker credits "U" for better working conditions

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JORDAN SCHRADER
Daily Staff Reporter
Published December 4, 2001

Students and administrators at the University of Michigan were instrumental in improving working conditions at a factory in Mexico that produces Michigan apparel, a modest seamstress turned labor advocate told students yesterday.



Paul Wong

Marcela Muoz Tepepa, a seamstress at the Kukdong factory in Atlixco, Mexico, that produces Michigan apparel for Nike, speaks through a translator last night at the School of Education about improvements in working conditions.

YONI GOLDSTEIN/Daily

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Marcela Muoz Tepepa, a seamstress at the Kukdong apparel factory in Atlixco, Mexico, was among the workers who initiated a work stoppage in protest of poor labor conditions there.

Tepepa said those conditions included low wages, abusive treatment, and food that made many workers seriously ill. The labor union that supposedly represented the workers refused to help them because it was controlled by the Mexican government, she added during a lecture at the School of Education.

Conditions are better at that factory now in part because the University of Michigan and other colleges and universities stepped into the dispute, Tepepa explained.

The Kukdong factory produces Nike clothing, including some bearing Michigan logos. After student protests helped bring the issue to the forefront, the University wrote a letter to Nike urging the company to intervene, and Nike in turn made demands to Kukdong for fair labor practices.

"Without the dialogue at the University of Michigan it would've been impossible to win the struggle," Tepepa said through an interpreter. "This is one of the reasons we continued to struggle and could stand everything that was going on in the Kukdong factory, because we knew we had your support."

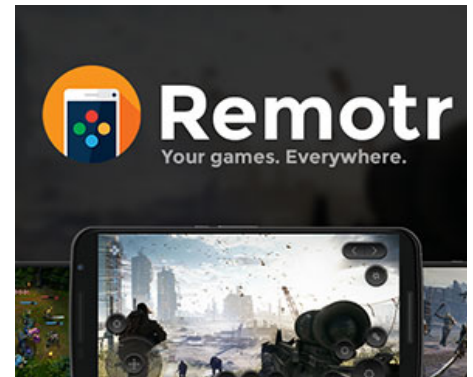
The workers' struggle began Dec. 15, 2000, when they staged a boycott of the factory cafeteria to protest the poor condition of the food they were served. After the boycott, leaders of the protest were fired and others were threatened.

In response, on Jan. 9 the workers began a strike that brought work to a halt. They were subsequently attacked by

police.

"The riot police started kicking the workers and shoving us around," Tepepa said. "There were people knocked unconscious."

The police action ended the work stoppage, but Kukdong management prevented many workers from returning to work. Under pressure from Nike and Reebok, another company whose apparel


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is produced by the Kukdong factory, most workers were eventually reinstated and allowed to organize in a union independent of government control.

"Management knows that it can't yell at workers because the workers have a union," Tepepa said.

Students Organizing for Labor and Economic Equality successfully pressured University administration to use their partnership with Nike to intervene in the dispute, said SOLE member Jackie Bray, an LSA sophomore.

Bray said SOLE members "pushed the issue" by meeting with University officials to negotiate terms of a letter to Nike, holding a protest in the president's office, and informing students about what was happening in Kukdong.

She attributed much of the gains made by student activists to the Worker Rights Consortium, in which the University of Michigan and many other universities are members. The WRC investigated and reported on the abuses in Kukdong.

"What the WRC allows students to do is leverage power over an entire industry," Bray said.

"It says to the skeptics: Yes, workers are powerful, yes, students are powerful, and we are even more powerful together," she said.

The presentation was sponsored by SOLE and the University's Committee on Labor Standards and Human Rights.



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