



Coordinated pressure

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All too often, student activist groups are dismissed as too idealistic or ineffective. But the recent success of University students and the Worker Rights Consortium in helping workers at Atlixco, Mexico's Kukdong garment factory win living wage provisions and the right to organize demonstrates that effective activism can produce real results. Marcela Muoz Tepepa, a Kukdong seamstress turned labor activist, was on campus Tuesday to share her experiences and celebrate the labor rights victory. She credited the University with playing an integral role in reforming the factory's poor working conditions, which included low wages, abusive treatment and physical abuse. Following a complaint about abuses that was filed with the WRC, a coalition of universities and labor rights advocates, in January, members of Students Organizing for Labor and Economic Equality began pushing the University to pressure Nike, whose merchandise is produced at Kukdong, to improve conditions at the factory. By disseminating information about the factory's conditions, and through a series of actions, SOLE members were eventually able to convince the administration to take an official stance by sending a letter to Nike. Despite Nike's initial reluctance, the pressure from the University and other collegiate members of the WRC forced the company to reassess and improve the conditions at the Kukdong factory. Student activism and the WRC provided the fundamental groundwork for these changes. The success of the Kukdong campaign also owes much to the cooperation between students and the University. The combination of student energy and activism with the administration's leverage and power proved exceptionally effective in forcing Nike to alter the labor practices in its factories. The success of the WRC here shows the ineffectiveness of the Fair Labor Association, of which the University is a member. The FLA, a product of the Clinton administration, is overly corporate-controlled the FLA's ignoring of the Kukdong situation shows that the once-looked down upon WRC is becoming the standard for labor rights advocacy in the collegiate apparel. Still, the workers at Kukdong are not out of the water they continue to face illegal resistance and threats. Recently the WRC has also investigated labor practices at the New Era Cap Company's Derby, N.Y. factory. The University should work with student labor advocated such as SOLE and the WRC to provide the most effective resistance possible to these illegal labor practices. As they proved with Kukdong, when students and the University work together, they form a powerful alliance capable of creating a great deal of positive change.