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## Ursinus students participate in JCPenney protest

By: Sarah Keck  
11/09/2006

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**Students from Ursinus College joined with students from other colleges and universities in the area and protested Nov. 4 at the JCPenney store at the King of Prussia Mall in solidarity for garment industry workers in Kenya.**

The action was part of a three-day conference put on by the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United Students Against Sweatshops, an international organization of student groups fighting for workers' rights and sweatshop-free labor conditions. The conference took place from Nov. 3 to 5 on the Ursinus campus.

"The purpose of this event was for student labor activists in the Mid-Atlantic region to unite and discuss campaigns and strategies, participate in a solidarity action and plan future actions," said Ursinus sophomore Lauren Schaeffer, a member of We Care About the Nation, a strategic student labor focused activist organization at Ursinus.

The protest aimed to increase awareness about a garment factory in Athi River, Kenya, called Rising Sun, which produces clothing for a corporation called Jones Apparel Group. This corporation sells clothing under the name Jones New York, which is then sold wholesale to American department stores. JCPenney is a major buyer of Jones garments.

"This past June, over 1,200 legally unionized workers were summarily dismissed and locked out of the factory," said Ursinus senior Jonathan Kieran, explaining his group's empathy with the workers at Rising Sun. "They were then replaced by casual workers willing to produce at a lower salary, with no benefits, and without the opportunity to join a union."

Kieran said that even though both the Ministry of Labor and Industrial Court of Kenya have sided with the workers, the owners of Rising Sun have still refused to comply with Kenyan and international labor law.

Saturday afternoon, students showed up at JCPenney and put informational brochures in the pockets and sleeves of Jones garments before delivering a formal letter to the managers of the store, informing them of the situation at Rising Sun. Students then formed a line and marched from one end of the King of Prussia Plaza to the other, chanting, distributing fliers, and waving two banners sporting the slogan: "JCPENNEY, STOP PAYING IN PENNIES."

The protest drew the attention of shoppers and mall security guards. Students were eventually forced to leave by security, and some were banned from the mall by the police. No one was arrested.

"It was definitely a shocking event," said Ursinus junior Chris Curley, who participated in the protest. "It brought awareness to an issue that most shoppers aren't necessarily thinking about." Katie Ringler, a senior at Ursinus, agreed. "It was empowering," she said.

"I think it was pretty incredible that people were so shocked by it, but were really receptive to it," said Dina Yarmus, Ursinus College senior and president of WeCAN. "I think people supported us."

The action came 10 days after members of WeCAN presented a letter to Ursinus President John Strassburger expressing their concerns about the conditions under which Ursinus apparel is made. The letter offered the possibility of the college adopting the Designated Supplies Program, a program of the Workers Rights Consortium, which would ensure that all Ursinus collegiate apparel comes from designated factories that respect workers rights and pay a living wage.

"Adopting the DSP and affiliation with the WRC would help improve the lives of many factory workers, and it would also show the public that an Ursinus education seeks to impact global debates beyond the traditional classroom setting," the letter stated. "By taking this initiative to ensure that our collegiate apparel is made in proper conditions, we are translating this mission from print to reality and living up to the ideals Ursinus has instilled in our campus community as a partner in the world."

For more information about news and events at Ursinus College, visit the college's Web site, [www.ursinus.edu](http://www.ursinus.edu).

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