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## Report: Maryland spends \$8 million on clothing sweatshops

Manufacturers deny the findings; coalition seeks stricter labor standards

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A coalition of human rights, religious and labor groups is calling on Gov. Martin O'Malley to stop spending \$8 million a year on companies that hire sweatshops overseas.

The demand follows a report Tuesday from SweatFree Maryland and SweatFree Communities, charging Maryland with letting "nearly \$8 million each year" in contracts to four companies that use the overseas factories to produce uniforms and shoes for state workers and emergency personnel.

The report, "Subsidizing Sweatshops," was compiled from interviews with employees at 12 factories in nine countries that do work for eight major uniform brands. Included were reports of forced and unpaid overtime, extensive child working hours, intimidation and harassment.

"The report confirmed what we already knew: Severe sweatshop violations are pervasive in the uniform industry. It is the norm," said report author Bjorn S. Claeson, a member of SweatFree Communities in Baltimore.

The companies that provide uniforms to Maryland - the Bob Barker Co., Rocky shoes, Cintas Corp. and Lion Apparel - have denied the findings.

"Our company has been affiliated with only those suppliers who share our commitment to the health and safety of those working in this industry," Bob Barker President Robert Barker Jr. said in a statement. "We do not condone, and have never been involved with, any violation of labor laws, directly or indirectly, to our knowledge. We follow specific measures to ensure our suppliers are in compliance with labor laws throughout the world."

A statement from Rocky brands noted that the company was the recipient of last year's Excellence in Social Responsibility award from American Apparel and Footwear Association, a national trade group.

"As a condition of doing business, Rocky regularly audits all of our vendor facilities to ensure they are in compliance with our standards," the statement said.

Tuesday's report has reinvigorated Del. Joanne C. Benson's efforts against worker exploitation. This year Benson introduced two bills that would have required state apparel contractors to ensure that their suppliers abide by the SweatFree code of conduct, and that all apparel purchased or licensed by the state be produced in the United States.

Benson (D-Dist. 24) of Landover withdrew the bills after both failed to make it out of a House subcommittee.

"I am more bound and determined to reintroduce this legislation next year because I find it reprehensible that we are patronizing companies that are so disrespectful to workers," she said.

The coalition wants O'Malley and other leaders to use the state's tax dollars to effect change in the apparel industry.

“There is much more awareness from governments that tax dollars have an impact not just on the goods that they buy, but on where those goods are from,” said Matthew Weinstein, Baltimore regional director for Progressive Maryland, a member of SweatFree Maryland. “It’s too big a problem for an individual, but government - especially the state level - does have the resources to be part of a consortium that holds suppliers to some sort of standards, and if the government sets the pace, the private market will follow.”

In May, O’Malley (D) signed into law legislation divesting the state’s pension fund from companies that do business with Iran. In Montgomery County, the County Council passed similar legislation in April barring the county’s pension fund from investing in companies that do business in Sudan. Monetary sanctions were used in the 1970s and 1980s when governments and private businesses protested apartheid in South Africa by divesting from that country.

Divestment can be a potent political tool. Both presumptive presidential candidates or their families have pulled their investments from companies that do business with Sudan.

“The governor supports disclosure of all kinds of such practices and would be interested in any regulation that would do that,” said Shaun Adamec, an O’Malley spokesman. “Obviously, this is an issue he cares about and would consider any regulation or legislation that could help achieve that goal.”