

Two American universities clamp down on student anti-sweatshop protests

Mark Rainer
17 April 2007

Over the past two weeks, student protests at the University of Michigan and the University of Southern California have been met with arrests or threats of arrest by the university administrations. In both cases the students were protesting the use of sweatshop labor in the production of university apparel.

On April 3, twelve students attending the University of Michigan were arrested after eight hours of a sit-in, occupying the reception area of President Mary Sue Coleman's office.

The students are members of Students Organizing for Labor and Economic Equality (SOLE), a student organization at the University of Michigan that, according to the SOLE website, "advocates for social justice and labor justice through direct action, education, and nationally coordinated campaigns."

The students staged the sit-in in an attempt to pressure the University to sign onto the Designated Suppliers Program, a set of regulations governing labor conditions in the production of university apparel.

Shortly after her arrival, at 9 am, President Mary Sue Coleman met briefly with the students to say, "We don't accept demands from students." According to University police spokeswoman Diane Brown, the students were "polite, responsible and completely well-behaved." Between 6 and 7 pm the students were arrested for trespassing. They were released shortly after 8 pm and are forbidden from entering the Fleming Building again.

University police are considering charging the students with "prohibited conduct at institutions of higher education willfully remaining on premises," a misdemeanor offensive punishable by up to a \$500 fine and 30 days in jail. In justifying the arrests, Brown referred to new policies adopted by the University following the September 11 attacks.

The order to arrest these students by University of Michigan administration is an unprecedented action and an attack on the democratic rights of students. The student sit-in came after President Coleman refused to meet with the students to discuss the University's rejection of the Workers Rights Consortium's Designated Suppliers Program (DSP). The sit-in was an attempt by the students to gain an audience with the President, and was carried out in a completely peaceful fashion.

According to Jason Bates, a sophomore and one of the students arrested, the arrests were unprecedented. Bates told the *Detroit News*, "There have been sit-ins before. This is the first time a president had someone arrested." In 1999, students staged a 51-hour sit-in that did not lead to any arrests.

After the 1999 sit-in, SOLE succeed in pressuring the University of Michigan to adopt a "Code of Conduct" to end sweatshop labor, but the code has not been enforced. The actions of SOLE over the past two years have been aimed at pressuring the University to join the DSP, which the group states is "a proposal guaranteeing an end to the use of sweatshop labor in making University apparel."

A similar incident occurred on April 10 at the University of Southern California. Thirteen students staged a sit-in outside University President Steven B. Sample's office. The students are members of the Student Coalition Against Labor Exploitation (SCALE) at USC. The aims of students were similar to those at the University of Michigan—they wanted the University to join the Workers Rights Coalition in order to end the use of sweatshop labor in producing University apparel.

The protest ended after the students were threatened and pressured by the administration. The most ruthless techniques were employed. University security first

confiscated the students' identification. Each student was issued a personalized letter threatening immediate suspension from school and eviction from their university housing. On top of this, the administration contacted the students' parents, so that they could exert further pressure on the students by calling them on their cell phones.

One student, Meher Talib, a junior and an international relations major, told the *Los Angeles Times* that her mother "called me freaking out." Her father also called and worried that her family could not afford tuition if she lost her scholarship. Talib said, "I almost felt violated...that the school would go so far to cause my parents pain."

The tactics of the administration ultimately succeeded. Six hours into the protest, after issuing letters charging the students with eight counts of misconduct, the University issued an ultimatum: end the sit-in or face charges. The students were given ten minutes to decide and ultimately gave in to the pressure. Talib explained to the *Times*, "We all got scared. You could feel the fear in the room."

The actions of these two student groups, SOLE and SCALE, are part of broader campaign in the United States to end the use of the sweatshop labor in the production of university apparel. The campaign began in 1997 with the Sweat-Free Campus Campaign, and shortly after as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), with which both SOLE and SCALE are affiliated.

USAS has been associated with the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), a member union of the AFL-CIO, and shares with it an essentially nationalist and reformist perspective. Member organizations of USAS, like SOLE and SCALE, stage sit-ins and other forms of protest in order to pressure universities into joining the Workers Rights Consortium, which in turn is supposed to ensure proper conditions in the production of university apparel.

Andrea Peters, a member of the International Students for Social Equality at the University of California Los Angeles, issued a statement condemning the arrests and threats against the students. "The ISSE does not agree with the political perspective of these student organizations," she said, "and in particular we do not think workers' rights can be secured by

pressuring universities or working with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Nevertheless, we strongly oppose the efforts of the universities to silence the outrage that students feel over the exploitation of workers that produce the clothes marketed on university campuses.

"The effect of these actions by university administrators at USC and the UM will be to create a climate of fear and intimidation on the campuses," Peters said. The ISSE is the student organization of the Socialist Equality Party.



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