

Foreign exchange students at Pennsylvania Hershey factory walk out over abuse

Naomi Spencer
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Hundreds of foreign students walked out of a Hershey's chocolate plant in Palmyra, Pennsylvania August 17 to protest against exploitative working conditions. The students are in the US as part of the State Department's Summer Work Travel Program.

The program, advertised as a way to practice English and travel the country in exchange for two months of work, draws more than 120,000 students to the US each year. Most students come from poor social conditions and economic prospects in their home countries, hoping to fund their education and better the financial position of their families.

Families often pay thousands of dollars to obtain the summer work visas, known as J-1 visas, through non-government firms. Visas for the 400 students employed in the Palmyra plant were arranged by a California-based company called the Council for Educational Travel, USA (CETUSA).

The students employed in Hershey's Eastern Distribution Center III were made to do heavy lifting and meet a strenuous production schedule, some of them working night shift. They were paid only \$8.35 an hour, and large portions of their paychecks were automatically deducted for program fees and rent. Students said after the deductions they were not earning enough to recoup the cost of the program and to make ends meet.

On Wednesday afternoon, some 200 students scheduled for second shift walked into the plant and served management with a petition signed by several hundred. They then marched out en masse with other students leaving first shift, chanting, "We are the students, the mighty, mighty students!" along with slogans in many different languages. The following day, more than 100 students demonstrated in downtown Hershey.

Students said they decided to protest after they discovered that neighbors in the buildings where they were housed were

paying significantly less in rent. The protest was organized in part by the New Orleans-based National Guestworker Alliance, which is aligned with the AFL-CIO and other unions.

Turkish engineering student Harun Burga told the local *Patriot News* newspaper, "Everybody has a dream of coming to America. And everybody wants to travel, wants to improve English. But we are just working, sleeping and sometimes eating."

"We want to own our rights," 20-year-old Chinese student Zhao Huijiao told the *New York Times*. "There is no cultural exchange, none, none... It is just work, work faster, work." She and three other Chinese students held out their arms to display bruises from moving heavy boxes. Zhao told the *Times* that they had each paid more than \$6,000 to secure their visas.

"I pick up boxes that are 40 pounds—I weigh 95 pounds," 19-year-old Ukrainian student Yana Bzengey told the *Patriot News*. "I complain. I say, 'I want another job.' They say if I do not work here they will cancel my visa and I will go home."

Harika Duygu Ozer, a 19-year-old student from Istanbul, said she had hoped the summer work program would allow her both to travel and to earn enough money to pay for medical school tuition. "I said, 'Why not?' This is America." She was put to work on third shift and made to work at a frenzied pace under the glare of surveillance cameras. "You stand for the entire eight hours," she told the *Times*. "It is the worst thing for your fingers and hands and your back; you are standing at an angle." Supervisors told her if she did not want to maintain the pace of work, she should leave.

"Since I came here, I have a permanent ache in my back," 26-year-old Ukrainian medical student Godwin Efobi told the paper. He was tasked with moving boxes. "Holding a pen is now a big task for me; my muscles ache."

Multiple companies have profited from the exploitative situation. In the past four years, Hershey has cut its full-time workforce by 700, and recently announced plans to cut 500

more workers next year. At the same time, the company's profits have soared; Hershey reported second quarter profits of \$130 million, up from \$46 million only the year before.

Hershey has denied any knowledge of the abuse, pointing instead to management company Exel, which oversees the Palmyra facility. Exel, in turn, has insisted it has no involvement in hiring, wages, or hours since it draws its temporary workforce from subcontractor SHS OnSite Solutions. SHS receives its pool of J-1 workers from CETUSA.

The exchange program is extremely lucrative. Companies such as CETUSA pull in thousands of dollars for sponsoring each student. Businesses using foreign students can save millions of dollars each year because they do not pay taxes on Medicare, Social Security, or unemployment. As a requirement of the J-1 program, students are required to take out health insurance policies before arriving in the US.

The State Department facilitates this exploitation by allowing companies to "police themselves." Until last year, the State Department did not keep records of complaints of abuse, and has consistently refused to release information about complaints to the media.

In a statement August 17, CETUSA CEO Rick Anaya insisted that the firm was "continuing to reach out to the students to explore ways to meet their concerns, including seeking new cultural experiences." In a separate comment to the *Times*, however, Anaya complained that the company was "not getting any cooperation... We are trying to work with these kids. All this negativity is hurting an excellent program. We would go out of our way to help them, but it seems like someone is stirring them up out there."

Anaya went further in an interview with the *Patriot News*, saying that the students were paid the same as local workers, and if they hadn't received an education in American culture, it was their own fault. "We can provide the environment," he said, "but as far as making contact with Americans, that's up to the kids. We provide the setting, but it's up to them to make the effort."

On Friday, CETUSA held a two-hour conference call with representatives of Hershey, Exel, and SHS in an attempt to save face. Afterward, CETUSA offered the students a trip to visit some historical landmarks. "We're actually doing this on our dime," Anaya commented. "We're paying for this trip. We're just fleshing out the details."

The students immediately indicated that they would reject the offer, saying that to accept the proposal would belittle the protest as though it was motivated by a desire to get a vacation.

"They're not interested," Godwin Efobi, the Ukrainian student, told the Associated Press late Friday. "If we say yes to this, it means that we were just making noise just so we could get a holiday. Yes, we want that, but there are bigger issues than just a holiday."

In contrast, National Guestworker Alliance executive director Saket Soni said only, "I honestly can't say whether they'll agree to it or not." While posturing as defenders of the protesting students, nationalist NGA and union officials have simultaneously argued that the students should be replaced with "local workers."

While the Hershey dispute is the first instance of organized opposition by foreign student workers, the conditions against which they are protesting are far from unique. An Associated Press investigation published December 6, 2010 found abuse of J-1 visa holders was rampant in the State Department's summer program. The federal Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agency has conducted at least two investigations into human trafficking in the summer jobs program. (See "Investigation exposes abuse of foreign students on US work visas")

The AP interviewed 70 students, finding most of them were disappointed or angry at their situation. That report found students who were forced to work in strip clubs, under threat of deportation or harm to families back home. The AP found other students taking home \$1 an hour or less, living in apartments without furnishings or in rooms so crowded that students sleep in shifts. Unable to afford food, many students turn to soup kitchens and homeless shelters; the AP reported a single Maryland church was serving upwards of 500 students per night.

In one case reported by the AP, Romanian dental student Natalia Berlinschi had come to South Carolina to work, but ended up begging on the Myrtle Beach boardwalk. She was forced to live in a three-bedroom house with 30 other exchange students. "This is not what I thought when I paid all this money to come here," she said. "I was treated very, very badly."



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