

No-sweat policy angers Toronto students, trustees

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After nearly three years of study, Toronto's Catholic schools have a policy forbidding sweatshop labour in the manufacture of school uniforms, but students, trustees and teachers who worked on formulating the policy are calling it a sham.

That's because [Toronto Catholic District School Board](#) trustees removed the paragraph which would have ensured third party inspections and public disclosure of factory names and locations before they passed the new policy Nov. 10.



"It's a disgrace," said Ward 5 trustee Maria Rizzo, a member of the committee.

"Bottom line is the trustees allowed the concerns of business to take precedence over the social justice issue of workers' rights," said Ward 9 councillor Catherine Leblanc-Miller.

"The whole purpose of the policy was to make sure there would be no sweatshops. Now, if a company wants to tell the board it doesn't have a sweatshop when it really does, the board's just going to take their word for it," said Ryan Nutter, a Grade 12 Cardinal Newman Catholic High School student.

The "Sweatshop Free Uniform Purchasing Policy" originally proposed envisioned the Toronto board joining a consortium with other Ontario Catholic boards, who would together become an affiliate of the Washington, D.C.-based Workers' Rights Consortium. The WRC monitors factories for more than 100 Canadian and American colleges and universities with ethical purchasing policies.

The company that controls the vast majority of the Toronto boards' uniform business did not want to see its subcontractors' names and locations posted on the WRC web site, or have to submit to WRC investigations on the basis of complaints.

"They assume that if there are sweatshops in the world we must be using them," R.J. McCarthy Ltd. president Martin McCarthy told *The Catholic Register*. "Well, we're not using them, and we have no intention of using them. In fact, they would ruin anybody's business — in many ways," noting the quality will be poor and cost savings would be minimal, with any savings going "to the person who is running the sweatshop."

Martin calls the WRC's approach to monitoring clothing factories "guilty until proven innocent."

Martin believes frivolous and baseless complaints to the WRC could capture headlines and damage the reputation of his family business. He also objects to the idea R.J. McCarthy suppliers would be made public on a web site and thereby allow competitors access to the factories that make his company's products.

"You're taking away any work that has been done in developing the recipes that go into your product. That's not fair. It's not done in other businesses," said Martin.

Nutter doesn't understand why McCarthy believes he will be unfairly accused if schools contract the WRC to do the job of inspecting and monitoring factories.

“We believe that McCarthy’s is clean,” he said. “They came out and proved it, but other companies haven’t done that.”

In the final version of the board’s new sweatshop policy a committee of board staff, trustees and industry representatives will take another look at how to enforce the policy. McCarthy has also offered to take board members and others to China to see the factories for themselves. Representatives of the Durham Catholic District School Board travelled with McCarthy to China in the fall.

Leblanc-Miller doesn’t buy the idea that the school board has the expertise to enforce its sweat-free policy unassisted.

“If I go to China to inspect a factory, what expertise do I have? I don’t speak Chinese. I can tell if the floors look clean. I can tell if you are or you are not shackled to your work station, but that’s pretty much it. I can’t tell if employees have regular meal breaks. I cannot tell whether female employees are required to have pregnancy tests. There are lots of things I can’t tell.”

The [TCDSB](#) decision against joining the WRC puts it out of step with Catholic boards across the province. An Oct. 21 memo from Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association executive director John Stunt invited all boards with no sweat policies or developing policies to get behind a York Catholic District School Board initiative to establish the Ontario Catholic School Boards’ Affiliate with the Workers’ Rights Consortium. Eleven boards had expressed an interest in being part of the WRC affiliate.

“OCSTA’s vision compels us to ‘promote education in our province that reflects the Catholic principles of social justice.’ This initiative to establish an Ontario affiliate of the WRC is certainly consistent with this vision,” wrote Stunt.

Martin said his company would continue to do business with York and other Ontario Catholic school boards if they do join the WRC.

“We comply with all the policies of all the school boards,” said Martin. “We deal with pretty much all the school boards in Ontario and across Canada — and we comply with all their policies.”

Rizzo hopes the Ontario affiliate will save the Toronto board’s policy. Basically any supplier who does business with Toronto and an affiliate member will have their subcontractor information listed on the WRC’s web site. Simply by checking regularly on the WRC’s web site, Toronto staff will be informed of any potential problems with suppliers.

Leblanc-Miller doesn’t believe the new committee with industry representatives can be relied on to catch problems with suppliers.

“It’s like having McDonald’s do it’s own health inspections,” she said.

Riding on the coattails of other school boards isn’t good enough for Nutter. He and 30 or 40 other students are planning a rally to pressure the board into adopting the full policy.

“We’re just going to keep pushing. Hopefully we can get them to reconsider it,” he said.

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