

United Students Against Sweatshops at the University of Michigan

March 15th, 2024

President Santa J. Ono
Office of the President
3190 Ruthven Building
1109 Geddes Ave
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1079

Dear President Ono,

We, United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), are writing to you in a moment of great disappointment. Next month marks four years since U-M producing garment workers were victims of an illegal [wage theft scheme at Hong Seng Knitting](#)—a U-M x Nike supplier in Bangkok, Thailand—and had [\\$800,000 in wages stolen from them](#). As a result of this appalling scheme, a worker who spoke up about Hong Seng’s crimes was threatened with police violence, and was [forced to flee](#) with his family to Myanmar. It is unequivocally clear: **the actions of Hong Seng are intolerable human rights violations, and through U-M’s \$173.8 million contract with Nike, this university remains complicit.**

Further exacerbating our intense dissatisfaction, **your administration has failed in its duty to uphold human rights in its response to the violations at Hong Seng, and failed to address Nike’s disregard for continued relationship with U-M.**

Needless to remind you, the President’s Advisory Committee on Labor Standards and Human Rights (PACLSHR) worked tirelessly to research, compile, and report the atrocities at Hong Seng and Nike’s response as clear violations of U-M’s apparel contract. [In this report](#), PACLSHR outlined three recommendations:

- I. *Recommendation 1:* The Committee recommends that Nike should honor Section 31 of the 2016 sponsorship agreement and **make available reports of investigations to the University of Michigan by October 21, 2023**
- II. *Recommendation 2:* The Committee recommends that Nike should ensure that the Hong Seng Knitting Company Limited workers are **paid appropriate compensation due to them** for the unpaid wages during the furlough period, preferably **by October 31, 2023**.
- III. *Recommendation 3:* The Committee recommends that licensing partners to the University of Michigan, including Nike, should be informed that **it is not**

consistent with our code of conduct to enter into agreements that prevent them from honoring their obligations to the University of Michigan.

On October 20th, 2023, [you accepted these recommendations](#), and accordingly, their deadlines.

When us students are given deadlines at this university, we are expected to abide by them with strict rigidity. Often when U-M students miss these deadlines, it has drastic effects on our GPA, class standing, and deeply affects both our personal standards, as well as the standards of this university. Students, particularly here at U-M, cannot imagine the academic disintegrity, intellectual dishonesty, and personal obstinacy it would take to consciously ignore recommendations of U-M's own committee on *labor standards and human rights for nearly five months*. Perhaps even more incendiary, and where this analogy ends, is that the material consequences of your inaction on Hong Seng are far more drastic. This is not a canvas discussion post, this issue is about human lives.

In addition to the acute distress Hong Seng garment workers live in, your own administration's inability to remedy this issue with Nike has had dire consequences for U-M as an institution:

First, PACLSHR's most important function, as a body to facilitate remediation of labor standards and human rights issues in U-M's global supply chain, has been rendered obsolete. Why are their recommendations being ignored? Why has your Office of General Counsel failed to receive a response from Nike *after nearly three months*? The lack of leadership and substantive action from your administration undermines the ability of PACLSHR to serve its purpose, and severely compromises integrity of this institution. This responsibility lies on your shoulders.

Second, U-M has betrayed the trust of its apparel distributors, community members, alumni, and students. U-M cannot affirm to stores like the MDen that the apparel they sell was not sewed with coerced and unpaid labor. Why should the MDen trust U-M's procurement decisions when it allows wage-theft-apparel to fester in its supply chain, and inevitably, within its store racks? Likewise, U-M violates the consensual relationship between itself and alumni, parents, students, and Ann Arbor community members by severing our collective trust in U-M to make ethical sourcing decisions and actively react to the human rights abuses that occur as a result of such decisions. The blatant disregard of Hong Seng workers condemns the entire U-M community to wear sweatshop-sewn clothes without their consent, and even more maliciously, parades under the illusory protection of the Block-M logo. You have a responsibility to inform the community: U-M's standards have failed. This responsibility lies on your shoulders.

Lastly, U-M has broken its precedent to hold apparel brands accountable for their violations of human rights in its name. As you know, when President Mary Sue Coleman was confronted with a similar issue, she publicly called Adidas to pay their workers their legally owed severance, and

through targeted efforts, [Adidas complied](#). The solution to Hong Seng exists, but its realization lies on your shoulders.

USAS demands the following of your administration, not out of unfounded moralism, but as a pragmatic course of action to rebuild U-M's integrity and uphold human rights standards:

- I. Publicly condemn Nike's apathetic position to remediate the human rights violations at Hong Seng Knitting, in direct violation of its contract with U-M.**
- II. Ensure Nike remediates Hong Seng violations by ensuring garment workers are paid their legally owed wages, in accordance with PACLSHR's recommendations.**
- III. As Nike persists in its recalcitrant position, U-M shall terminate its apparel licensing contract with Nike by April 15th, 2024.**

Thankfully, you're not alone. Students on university campuses across the country are mobilized in solidarity with Hong Seng workers, calling on their administrators to uphold their own procurement standards and hold Nike accountable. [Students for International Labor Solidarity](#) (SILS), is an active network of supply chain workers, international labor unions, and university student groups organized to facilitate enforcement of university labor standards. In your administration's ineptness to remediate this issue in a timely manner, SILS will continue to demonstrate that neither Nike, nor U-M, can profit off of wage-theft.

SILS, USAS, and concerned U-M students reject your words, claiming a commitment to a [just resolution](#) at Hong Seng. Rhetoric doesn't pay workers, we'll believe your commitment when we see it. We look forward to hearing your plan for remediation through contract termination and expect communication of a comprehensive outline aligned with these demands **by March 22nd, 2024.**

Sincerely,

United Students Against Sweatshops at U-M and concerned students

U-M Student Organization Signatories:

United Students Against Sweatshops at the University of Michigan, Local 17
Graduate Employees' Organization, AFT-MI 3550
Inter-Cooperative Council at Ann Arbor
The Young Democratic Socialists of America at the University of Michigan

The Arab-Jewish Alliance
United Asian American Organizations
Global Scholars Program Student Organization
La Casa
American Civil Liberties Union Undergraduate Chapter
South Asian Awareness Network
The Michigan Institute for Progressive Policy
Jewish Voice for Peace at U-M

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