

USAS | United Students Against Sweatshops

1155 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 500, Washington DC 20036 | organize@usas.org | usas.org



May 27, 2014

Jerry Stritzke
CEO, REI
6750 South 228th St
Kent, Washington

Sent via email

Dear Mr. Jerry Stritzke,

I write with urgency on behalf of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), the country's largest student-run anti-sweatshop organization with affiliates at over 150 universities and colleges. USAS is deeply concerned over the deadly workplace safety practices of VF Corporation, owner of sportswear brand North Face. We have been, and are continually, urging North Face/VF Corporation to join the 150 brands and retailers from over 20 countries that have signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, a legally-binding agreement that holds the promise of bringing an end to the mass fatality disasters in Bangladesh garment factories. Still, however, the company has refused. That's why we're turning to REI – a retailer with a history of supporting progressive initiatives – to ask that you refuse to carry North Face products until the company signs the Accord.

As you may know, the workers safety crisis in the Bangladeshi garment industry has reached a breaking point. Over 1,500 workers have died in the last two years alone in Bangladesh due to preventable factory fires and building collapses. Last April, 1,132 workers were killed in the Rana Plaza factory collapse, making it the deadliest disaster in the history of the garment industry.

VF Corporation, the parent company of North Face, has an abysmal track record on worker safety in Bangladesh, which raises many questions about the company's commitment to securing safe and dignified working conditions for its garment workers. The following is a list of recent violations of the right to a safe workplace that have occurred in VF's supply chain in Bangladesh since 2010:

- In 2010, VF was producing at That's It Sportswear factory in Bangladesh (owned by Hameem Group), which burned, killing 29 workers and injuring more than a hundred. The factory had illegal construction, no proper fire exits, shoddy wiring, and locked exit doors. Workers were trapped on the top floors of the factory. Many jumped to their deaths. VF had repeatedly inspected the factory and yet had completely failed to address the safety hazards.
- In October of 2012, another VF factory, Eurotex, which was disclosed as a producer of collegiate apparel, burned in Dhaka. This was a major fire, though it did not completely destroy the factory. No one was killed in the fire, because the factory was closed for a holiday – if the fire had occurred during the workday, many could have died. When contacted about this fire, VF claimed that their own disclosure data was wrong and they had stopped using the factory.
- In August 2013, the Worker Rights Consortium, an independent labor rights monitoring organization, conducted a safety assessment of Optimum Fashion, a long-time VF contract

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factory producing collegiate apparel, through VF Imagewear. The WRC's inspection of Optimum Fashion uncovered a number of very serious safety hazards, all of which constitute violations of university code of conduct provisions requiring licensees to maintain safe workplaces. Any of these hazards could result in injury or death to workers. These violations "included inadequate means for workers to escape the factory in the event of a fire and structural flaws that would facilitate the rapid and widespread propagation of deadly smoke throughout the factory building."

- On February 20, 2014, the WRC conducted an on-site follow up inspection at Optimum Fashion, four months after VF was given the results of the WRC's initial inspection. According to a WRC memo, their follow-up inspection found that "[T]here has been very little progress in addressing the fire hazards at Optimum Fashion. The factory still does not have adequate fire exits; there are no fire doors; there is no fire separation; the interior exit route is unprotected and ends with a lockable door; there is not adequate emergency lighting; and there is not an adequate alarm system. In one crucial area, the factory is even more dangerous than when the WRC first inspected it: management added large, unprotected door openings to the external exit stair, making it more likely that this stair will be unusable in a fire (because it will be exposed to heat and smoke from within the building)."

Despite its sizeable presence in Bangladesh with over 91 factories employing 190,000 workers, and the above evidence of mishandling of safety hazards in its factories, VF Corporation has refused to sign the Bangladesh Safety Accord, an innovative, legally-binding agreement – now signed by over 150 brands and retailers – mandating the repair and renovation of garment factories. The Accord requires independent inspections by trained fire safety experts; public reporting of the results of all inspections; mandatory repairs and renovations financed by the brands to address all identified hazards; and a central role for workers and their representatives.

Rather than signing the Accord, VF has joined forces with Walmart and the Gap to create a company-controlled, non-binding agreement called the "Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety." Labor and human rights advocates have critiqued this program for its exclusion of workers and their representatives, and its failure to obligate brands to pay a single cent toward the repair and renovation of unsafe factories.

If REI took a stand for workers rights by cutting ties with North Face/VF, it would not be alone. Since September, 23 colleges and universities – American, Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Duke, Emerson, George Washington, Georgetown, Grand Valley State University, Macalester College, Northwestern, NYU, Oberlin College, Penn State, Rutgers, Syracuse, Temple University, University of Illinois-Chicago, University of Michigan, UPenn, University of Washington-Seattle, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Washington State University – have required their licensees, including VF, to sign the Accord. **In doing so, these universities have taken a vital step to ensure their athletic apparel is not produced in deathtrap factory conditions; REI should take this same step to ensure the apparel it sells on its storeroom floor is not made in unsafe conditions.**

As a company with a commitment to environmentalism and other social justice initiatives, we hope that REI will stand in solidarity with Bangladeshi workers and students who are urging VF to sign the Accord. We urge REI to review the information in this letter and seriously question whether it wants to continue its retail relationship with North Face/VF Corporation. If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at 817-964-9836 or garrett@usas.org. **We ask that you please**

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respond to this letter by June 4th, as your response will determine the next steps of our national network. We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Garrett Strain". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Garrett Strain
International Campaigns Coordinator
United Students Against Sweatshops

CC:

Catherine Walker, Senior Vice President and General Counsel, REI
Kirk Myers, Corporate Social Responsibility Manager, REI
Rick Bingle, Vice President of Supply Chain, REI
Tim Spangler, Vice President of Retail, REI
Cathy Feingold, International Department Director, AFL-CIO
Charles Kernaghan, Director, Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights
Ineke Zeldenrust, International Coordinator, Clean Clothes Campaign
Judy Gearhart, Executive Director, International Labor Rights Forum
Kalpona Akter, Executive Director, Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity
Michael Bride, Director of Global Campaign Strategies, United Food & Commercial Workers
Scott Nova, Executive Director, Worker Rights Consortium
Tim Beaty, Director of Global Strategies, International Brotherhood of Teamsters
Tim Waters, Political Director, United Steelworkers
United Students Against Sweatshops Coordinating Committee