LAWMAKERS, UNIONS SAY GAP FACTORIES 'REPRESS' OVERSEAS WORKERS

Copyright 2002 Bloomberg L.P.
Bloomberg News

May 16, 2002

by Amy Strahan Butler

Eleven U.S. lawmakers wrote to Gap Inc.'s Chief Executive Millard Drexler, accusing the company of contracting with foreign manufacturers who pay workers poverty wages and pulling contracts from unionized factories.

The lawmakers said that factories in Guatemala, El Salvador and Lesotho that make clothing for Gap pay as little as $54 per month and verbally and physically abuse their employees. "A pair of pants and a shirt at the Gap cost more than the $54 a worker in Lesotho makes in a month," said Representative Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat who signed the letter. "The GAP is looking the other way while its workers are being abused and threatened."

The accusations against Gap, the largest U.S. clothing chain, and recent campaigns against other retailers comes amid increased criticism by unions and human rights advocates of the impacts of globalization.

The lawmakers cited information on factory conditions from union representatives in the countries and from the Union of Needletrades Industrial & Textile Employees in New York. The lawmakers called on the company to improve low pay and harsh working conditions at the factories and asked for a list of its contractors.

A Gap spokeswoman defended the company's efforts to improve working conditions.

The spokeswoman also denied that Gap withdrew contracts from an El Salvador factory when workers there tried to unionize.

"We've been working tirelessly for months to help bring a resolution of issues between union representatives and the factory manufacturer, Tainan, in El Salvador," said Tamsin Randlett, a spokeswoman for Gap.

Production for the company at that factory stopped due to "fashion-driven decisions," she said. The company maintains a monitor there and in other countries worldwide to oversee working conditions, she said.