



Houston & Texas News

Timoth O'Brien, founder of University of Houston Students Against Sweatshops, at his home garage, where his group creates banners and signs.

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UH student group to protest use of 'sweatshop labor' at March 31 rally

Campus group to hold protest rally March 31

By **ANNETTE BAIRD**
Chronicle Correspondent

A University of Houston student who founded a group opposed to sweatshop labor said the university is not doing enough despite the recent formation of a task force that will explore the concerns of students who want the university to stop doing business with manufacturers using "sweatshop labor."

Timothy O'Brien called UH's president and system chancellor Renu Khator's task force "nothing more than a publicity stunt."

"(Khator) She is not including us in the decisions that are being made," said O'Brien, a Ph.D history student, who founded UH Students Against Sweatshops last June. "She did this all behind our backs."

O'Brien said he is disappointed there are no members who are experts on global labor issues — and no one from the student organization — appointed to the task force.

Khator was not available for comment.

Don Foss, senior vice president and provost, who appointed members of the task force, said between them, the seven-person group brings expertise in commerce, law, economics and microeconomics in developing countries to the table.

Chaired by Steven Craig, professor of economics, the task force includes Richard Alderman, director of the Consumer Law Center, political science Professor Jim Granato, who is director of the Center for Public Policy, accounting Professor Saleha Khumawala and Harrell Rodgers Jr., professor and chair of the political science department. Stephan Quezada, secretary of the Student Government Association, is the student representative, and Keith Kowalka, president of the University Staff Council, represents the staff.

Foss said the task force would welcome input from students and staff and would look at all the concerns, including labor code practices and the university's own conduct in its licensing contracts.

"The purpose is to study and weigh the issues," Foss said.

O'Brien said it is not enough and is planning another protest rally at noon Monday, March 31. The group plans to meet in front of M.D. Anderson library on campus and head to the chancellor's office.

"Anyone who has pride in the university should stand up for what's right," O'Brien said, urging participants to "bring noisemakers, signs and enthusiasm."

O'Brien's goal is to persuade the university to affiliate itself with the Worker Rights Consortium, a third party independent monitoring organization, and sign on to the Designated Supplier's Program.

The program is designed to protect the rights of workers who sew university logo apparel, which dozens of universities across the country have signed on to.

"I wanted to be able to buy clothes with the UH logo that are sweat-free," O'Brien said. "I don't have that option now."

O'Brien said he "won't be bowed by Khator's threat" of disciplinary action, expressed in a letter dated March 3 he received from her office, should the group continue its current method of protest.

In her letter, which is posted on the group's [Web site](#), Khator wrote "It is absolutely clear the University of Houston is committed to fair labor practices," and called the students' efforts to shine light on the issue "not only disruptive but counterproductive to the cause."

Khator warned the students that "any and all disruptive behavior ... will be subject to discipline under university policies and procedures."

In February, O'Brien organized a protest rally and inundated the chancellor's office with phone calls and faxes.

Foss said there are more constructive ways for students to express their concerns, including the Student Government Association and now the task force.

The UH student government association in January unanimously passed a bill to affiliate with the Worker Rights Consortium, a third party independent monitoring organization, and to sign on the Designated Supplier Program, a system to source clothes from sweatshop-free facilities.



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