

You are what you wear

Universities must ensure their branded clothing isn't made in sweatshops

JUDY FUDGE

From hoodies and T-shirts to baseball caps, apparel with university and collegiate names and logos is a booming business in Canada and the United States.

Colleges and universities earn revenue each year by licensing their trademarks to major apparel companies, including Lululemon and Fanatics. These companies, in turn, rely on vast supplier networks located primarily in countries with weak labour protections and regulations.

The result is a disconnect between the values many universities espouse and the practices they enable. Canadian universities have a critical role to play in the advancement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 8, which promotes sustainable economic growth and decent work for all.

Yet workers who make university-branded apparel often receive low wages, face gender-based violence and harassment, experience retaliation for union involvement, and work in unsafe buildings.

As an expert in labour exploitation and modern slavery in supply chains, I believe universities and colleges have a responsibility to ensure these workers have decent working conditions.

Rise of student activism and monitoring

Concerns about labour conditions are not new. Since the late 1990s, student activism has led many universities to adopt codes of conduct for licences for upholding workers' labour rights. However, finding out if these rights were actually being upheld was challenging.

Universities turned to certification programs and social auditing firms to monitor compliance, but research shows these programs are often lax and fail to disclose violations. These monitors are too close to the companies they work for, leading to conflicts of interest and limited transparency.

Because of this, the student anti-sweatshop movement pressed for independent monitoring.



UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

University affiliation is crucial for the Worker Rights Consortium's success. The University of Guelph is one of only six Canadian affiliates. McMaster University recently withdrew after 23 years.

In 2000, United Students Against Sweatshops established the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an independent organization that was initially set up to help colleges and universities enforce their manufacturing codes of conduct. It also performs independent investigations for other organizations and companies when asked to do so.

Unlike most corporate social auditors, the WRC is the only independent organization serving the university community that isn't affiliated with the apparel industry.

It investigates factories based on worker testimonies. These investigations can be triggered by reports from universities, workers or local non-governmental organizations. Investigations are designed to

ensure transparency through public reporting, and the WRC works with apparel brands and factories to secure remediation.

According to the WRC, it has helped more than 700,000 workers (through factory investigations) win more than \$150 million (U.S.) of legally owed back pay. It has also helped reverse terminations for 1,810 workers who were wrongfully fired for exercising their right to associate.

Lessons from Rana Plaza

The importance of independent monitoring of corporate labour rights codes was highlighted by the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in April 2013, which killed 1,131 workers.

Factories in the building produced garments for several major brands, including the Loblaw's Joe Fresh line.

Despite some of the brands having codes of conduct and audits, none identified or corrected safety violations in the months before the collapse.

In the aftermath, the WRC helped implement and enforce the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, a five-year independent, legally binding agreement between global brands, retailers and trade unions to build a safe Bangladeshi garment industry.

Reports of the accord show

Trainees work at a garment factory in Dhamrai, near Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2018. Work done since the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in April 2013 shows that reducing and addressing labour abuse in global garment chains is possible, writes Judy Fudge.

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significant improvements in fire and building safety.

Expanding the fight for workers' rights

Beyond Bangladesh, the WRC has devised ways for brands to use economic leverage to persuade suppliers to address systemic problems like gender-based violence and harassment in the garment sector.

Its investigations led to two agreements to eliminate these issues: one in Lesotho in 2018 and one in Central Java in 2024. The WRC's university-affiliate program was crucial in Central Java, since the supplier produced university-logo goods.

This work shows that reducing and addressing labour abuse in global garment chains is possible. The WRC's success stems from its institutional features that enhance its legitimacy: independence from unions and corporations, its investigative nature and its focus on workers.

Why university participation matters

University affiliation is crucial for the WRC's success. While many universities have signed on, the number of affiliates has declined from 186 in 2010 to 154 in 2025.

To become an affiliate, a university must adopt a manufacturing code of conduct, incorporate it into contracts with apparel companies, share a list of factories involved in producing their merchandise and pay an annual affiliation fee.

Only six Canadian universities are affiliates: McGill University, Queen's University, Thompson Rivers University, the University of Guelph, the University of Winnipeg and the University of Toronto.

McMaster University, where I taught in the School of Labour Studies until this year, recently withdrew after 23 years.

For Canadian universities that market themselves as global citizens and champions of the sustainable development goals, affiliation should be seen as a moral obligation.

By choosing to become an affiliate, universities demonstrate their commitment to protecting the rights of workers producing the apparel and goods that carry their names.

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Of Kennedy and kings and power grabs

Lasting societal change comes not from top-down power, but outward from hearts and minds



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

Thinking today about kings and politics, let's turn to John F. Kennedy along with Mr. Ashley, who taught me high school history.

It's JFK today because Nov. 22 is the day he was assassinated. That was 1963, but the American was one of those people who spoke deeper into time with thoughts like, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

It's good, then, to give something of yourself to others, if not to your entire country then simply to people in your everyday circles. You're given your passions and skills and experience — your personhood — for a reason.

Never one to give you a small challenge, my father put it this way: "There are only two types of people in the world: the givers and the takers." That is, are you going to help clean up the world's mess, or make it worse?

Mr. Ashley comes to mind for other reasons, namely his wardrobe. He'd rotate three neckties: his solid red "rage tie" that showed his belligerent side, his traditionally striped "today is a calm day tie" and a hazy-blue cloudy tie that students called his "bender tie."

He seemed to save it for days when he explained, hands waving wildly during lengthy expositions, knotty topics like the Age of Absolutism — the era when monarchs ruled Europe with unchecked power.

So, about our cousins south of the



border. While Kennedy spoke about serving the country as a political variation of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you'd want them to do to you," today's American president says something more like, "Do others in before others can do you in." No surprise that the No Kings in America movement has come in response.

And like Mr. Ashley's neckties, the interesting news follows. Take the raging, expletive-filled rant by Pete Hoekstra, U.S. ambassador to Canada. Or the "today is a calm day" Donald Trump saying, unreliably, how "very happy" Canada will be with its coming trade deal. Plus all the cloudy, bender-type political and economic stories relating to shades of absolutism.

Even without Mr. Ashley's history lessons, most of us know that

absolute power corrupts absolutely. So modern democracies, imperfect as they are, have elected legislatures and courts and other checks to keep the system at least somewhat honest. Now, we watch our southerly cousins as their foundations are tested.

Speaking of kings and power and these matters, arriving between Black Friday and Cyber Monday is the first Sunday of Advent. That's the season when people in much of the world actually reduce life's daily noise and clutter to get quiet enough to consider a different kingdom — the kingdom of heaven. It's a kingdom of paradox.

Christ said as much when, in one of history's more enduring lines, he told his critics, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's." Funny also how the only

A No Kings in America sign in South Lee, Mass. Commenting on history, kings and politics, Thomas Froese writes, "Now we watch our southerly cousins as their foundations are tested."

THOMAS FROESE

crown Jesus wore in this world was one of thorns.

He didn't need anyone to tell him how human power without humility goes sideways, which says something about America's recent taste for so-called Christian nationalism and why it's off the mark.

It's because trying to bring God's kingdom — one of justice and mercy and humility — through government force isn't Christ's example. Rather than clamouring for power, think of yeast. Jesus explained it. A small amount infuses an entire bread loaf from inside.

Similarly, lasting societal change comes not from top-down political power, but outward from hearts and minds.

Still, healthy democracies easily welcome people of one faith or another into a pluralistic public square, including government. Consider JFK. His critics said don't vote for this Catholic because he'll be in the pocket of the pope. He never was. On the contrary, people with thoughtful faith often bring a better understanding of what it means to be human.

But an opportunistic religious-political power grab? That's different. It's just more taking and confusion and mess.

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