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A Hip-Hop Star's Fashion Line Is Tagged With a Sweatshop

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

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A 19-year-old Honduran apparel worker and a leading workers' rights group said yesterday that the hip-hop artist Sean Combs was using a sweatshop in Honduras to produce tens of thousands of shirts for his Sean John fashion company.

The worker, Lydda Eli Gonzalez, said the factory's managers yelled and cursed at workers, forced them to work unpaid overtime and fired employees for being pregnant. She said that when workers sought to unionize last summer to improve conditions, she and 14 other outspoken union supporters were suddenly fired.

Steve Hawkins, owner of the factory, Southeast Textiles S.A., called the charges lies and said that the factory strictly complied with the law and maintained good conditions.

Jeff Tweedy, executive vice president of Sean John, the New York-based apparel company run by Mr. Combs, who performs as P. Diddy, said: "We have absolutely no knowledge of this situation. However, we take



Angel Franco/The New York Times

Lydda Eli Gonzalez says a Honduran sweatshop makes Sean Jean clothes. She claims the factory fired her for trying to organize a union.

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these matters very seriously, and we will have our director of compliance look into the matter immediately."

Sean John is one of the factory's biggest customers. The plant, in Choloma, Honduras, employs 380 workers who produce long-sleeved T-shirts with "SJ" or "Sean John" emblazoned on them.

Ms. Gonzalez said she traveled to New York from Honduras to ask Mr. Combs to pressure the factory's owner to treat the workers better. Her trip was sponsored by the National Labor Committee, a New York-based group that embarrassed the Gap, Kathie Lee Gifford and other major fashion names in exposing sweatshop conditions at factories they used.

Ms. Gonzalez said employees were ordered not to talk during work hours, needed passes to go to the bathroom and were generally limited to two bathroom visits a day. Managers called workers on the loudspeakers if they were in the bathroom more than a few minutes, she said. Managers often ordered female workers to take pregnancy tests, she said, and if they were pregnant, they were immediately fired to help the company save on medical expenses and maternity leave.

"It's a bad place to work, depressing; there's a lot of humiliation," said Ms. Gonzalez, who is on her first trip outside Honduras. "They yell at you with gross words. They call you 'dog,' 'lazy,' 'burro.'"

One day last May, Ms. Gonzalez said, the factory's manager grabbed the throat of an employee who was complaining that workers were being shortchanged.

"My purpose is to represent all the sewing machine operators in Honduras and to put an end to the humiliation and labor violations," Ms. Gonzalez said. "Sean Combs is a man with great power and influence, and we think he should help us and help end these violations."

In a telephone interview from Honduras, Mr. Hawkins, the factory's owner, said: "I categorically deny every single claim they've made. It's nothing more than a labor union with an ax to grind."

He said that once the union's organizing effort failed, union supporters retaliated by spreading lies against the factory. He said that workers were not fired for supporting a union, but for bad quality or an uncooperative attitude. Honduran law prohibits firing workers for supporting a union.



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Mr. Hawkins said that the factory was air-conditioned, that it paid overtime and that it had a nurse and a doctor on staff. He said the factory passed muster with outside monitors who inspected it every few months at the behest of the companies that use it.

"I never mistreated anybody," said Mr. Hawkins, who said he moved his operation from North Carolina to Honduras because of pressures from the North American Free Trade Agreement. "I treat employees just like I'd like to be treated myself."

He acknowledged that the factory's manager, Delia Cruz, had recently left the company. "She was much hated and resigned two weeks ago," he said.

Charles Kernaghan, executive director of the National Labor Committee, defended his group's conclusions about Southeast Textiles, saying he and other committee officials had interviewed about 20 workers from the factory.

"It's a factory where the workers have zero rights," he said. "It shows the whole charade of monitoring. The workers were ordered not to tell the truth to the monitors, and they knew if they did they would be fired."

He asserted that Mr. Combs's use of such a factory was more shocking than Kathie Lee Gifford's. She was embarrassed when a 15-year-old Honduran girl came to the United States in 1996 to describe conditions at a factory making goods for the Kathie Lee line, which was sold at Wal-Mart.

Mr. Kernaghan said the workers received 15 cents in wages to make Sean Jean shirts that sell for \$40. Many workers said the company failed to make mandatory contributions to the Honduras national health fund, he said.

"Sean Combs obviously has a lot of clout, and he can literally do a lot overnight to help these workers," Mr. Kernaghan said. "This isn't Kathie Lee selling shirts in Wal-Mart for \$5.99. He is selling T-shirts for \$40, and you'd expect the workers to be treated better and earn a little more."

Ms. Gonzalez said the workers earned 90 cents an hour, far too little to support an individual or a family. Many afternoons the seamstresses were forced to work two extra hours to try to meet a production goal, she said. The workers invariably failed to meet that goal, she said, because Sean Jean standards were so exacting. As a result, she said, the workers received neither a production bonus nor pay for the extra hours.

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