

Campaigners against clothing sweatshops go to the Olympics

EPA

The visually-enhanced Thorpedo

ADIDAS may be upset that the star Australian Olympic swimmer whom it sponsors, Ian "the Thorpedo" Thorpe, has cast doubt on the firm's claims that its new swimsuits "help you swim faster". Mr Thorpe reckons that most of the recent advances in swimsuits have been "visual". But several other top sporting-goods brands have a different reason to fret. The shirts and shoes they make for athletes are the target of perhaps the biggest-ever crusade against sweatshops. The Play Fair at the Olympics Campaign was launched jointly in March by Oxfam, Global Unions, an international confederation of trade unions, and the Clean Clothes Campaign. It juxtaposes the ideals of the Olympics with the realities of the sportswear industry. And big brands such as Puma and Umbro are starting to sweat.

A report by the campaigners describes labour problems allegedly arising from the industry's long and winding supply chains. Big companies outsource manufacturing through contractors, then subcontractors, and fierce retail competition translates into a squeeze on factories in Bulgaria, China, Indonesia or wherever. Deadlines are tighter, and sportswear retail prices have slid by 5-10% in the past five years. Yet the big-brand companies still claim to have proper codes of conduct for labour practices. Seven-day weeks and 18-hour days? Oh, those are the suppliers' fault.

Globalisation

In the general sweat of the clothing industry, why target sportswear?

Because it has a few globally known companies with big market shares. The biggest, Nike, Adidas and Reebok, which together have nearly 15% of the \$58 billion market, have already been "named and shamed". After the anti-sweatshop campaigns of the late 1990s, all three joined the Fair Labour Association, which sends inspectors, unannounced, to check on working conditions in factories. But, in an interesting illustration of how modern campaigns by activists against companies can gather momentum, the top-tier companies now complain that lesser ones get away with poor labour practices, and so impede progress in the whole sector. The Olympic campaigners are therefore targeting second-tier brands such as Puma, Mizuno, Umbro and Asics. Several of these have begun talks with the campaign and with the International Labour Organisation, an arm of the United Nations.

The campaigners sent the International Olympic Committee a petition that it said had over 500,000 signatories, calling on the IOC to ensure that products displaying its five-ring logo are made by companies that observe

"fair labour standards". The IOC has ducked, but the European Parliament has passed a resolution supporting this aim, and a bill before the United States Congress seeks to compel that country's Olympics committee to do so. How much consumers care, if at all, remains unclear.