# Michigan Is the Latest University to End a Licensing Deal With an Apparel Maker

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The University of Michigan announced on Monday that it was ending its apparel licensing agreement with the Russell Corporation, becoming the 12th university to do so in response to the company's decision to close a unionized factory in Honduras.

University of Michigan officials said an agreement under which Russell made T-shirts, sweatshirts and fleeces with university logos would end as of March 31 because Russell had violated the university's code of conduct calling on licensees to guarantee the basic rights of workers.

Michigan joined Columbia, Cornell, Duke, Georgetown, Purdue, Rutgers and several other universities that curtailed agreements with Russell, a subsidiary of Fruit of the Loom, which is owned by Berkshire Hathaway.

On Jan. 31, Russell closed its Jerzees de Honduras plant, where 750 of the 1,800 employees had joined a union, and the management and the union were in a contract dispute.

The Worker Rights Consortium, a factory monitoring group sponsored by 185 universities, condemned the closing, saying it had been done partly because of antiunion animus. Another monitoring group, the Fair Labor Association, also found labor violations.

In a report issued Feb. 16, Russell said the closing was the result of "economic considerations and was not caused by the presence of the union at the factory."

John Shivel, senior vice president for marketing, advertising and communications at Fruit of the Loom, said the company could not grant an interview about the universities' decisions.

Kelly Cunningham, a University of Michigan spokeswoman, said the school ended Russell's license on the recommendation of the university president's Advisory Committee on Labor Standards and Human Rights.

"The committee found that the company had not respected the employees' right to association and had not adhered to the company's own standards of conduct," Ms. Cunningham said. "We do not feel that continuing the license is appropriate."

Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, said, "Over a period of two years, Russell engaged in the systematic abuse of the associational rights of its workers in Honduras, thereby gravely and repeatedly violating the universities' codes of conduct."

His consortium, an independent labor rights monitoring group, and the Fair Labor Association had previously found that Russell's Honduras operation improperly fired 145 union supporters in

2007. After numerous universities and student groups protested, the company reinstated the workers, paid back wages and granted union recognition.

The consortium also found that factory supervisors had harassed and intimidated union supporters and had denied union officials and government inspectors access to the plant.

“This is a toxic company,” said Leigh Wedenoja, a University of Michigan senior who is a member of the president’s advisory committee as well as Students Organizing for Labor and Economic Equality. “We feel that if the university is serious about encouraging human rights, then we could not keep Russell as a licensee.”

Last Friday, Cornell announced it was ending its agreement with Russell. A University spokesman, Mike Powers, said “Cornell is committed to respecting the rights of workers around the world, and we expect the companies that are licensed to produce Cornell apparel to share that commitment.”

In its report last week, Russell wrote, “We acknowledge that management mistakes were made that led to a failure to adhere” to “standards on freedom of association.”

The company vowed to improve its compliance and enhance what it called its “overall corporate social responsibility process,” includes having third-party monitors inspect factories.