

Workers assail costume plant

Employees at Queens company's Mexican factory are back at work after strike over labor practices

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Workers at a Mexican factory owned by Rubie's Costume Co. have accused the Queens-based firm of hiring underage workers, providing unsanitary working conditions and refusing to recognize an independent union.

Rubie's, based in Richmond Hill with facilities in Jericho, Melville and Bay Shore, disputes those contentions, saying the accusations stem from a dispute between two labor unions vying to represent workers. Marc Beige, the company's president, said the plant has been unionized since its inception 14 years ago, but that a rival union, called CROC, began organizing workers under its own banner two months ago.

He added that the factory has submitted to several private and public audits that have uncovered no serious violations. A few minor violations, involving first-aid kits and evacuation doors, were quickly corrected, he said.

In a report released last month, CROC said it found evidence of 13- to 15-year-old girls working at the factory, which has produced Barbie costumes as well as generic, nonlicensed costumes. (In Mexico, 14- and 15-year-olds can work under certain conditions, with parental permission.) The union included a list of 12 other complaints, including unpaid overtime and forced pregnancy tests.

Several nonprofit organizations say that Beige's description of the situation, as a conflict between two legitimate unions, is inaccurate.

Stephen Coats, executive director of U.S./Labor Education in the Americas, said the incumbent union, a branch of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico, is a "stealth" union, an absentee group that signs contracts with factory owners primarily to provide owners with protection from accusations that they don't let workers organize.

According to Coats, factory workers were not aware of CTM until they began organizing a separate union, the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos, or CROC.

Stealth unions are a common feature of Mexico's maquiladora, or factory, system, said

Harley Shaiken, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and an expert on Mexico's labor market.

Though he could not comment on the specifics of the Rubie's factory, Shaiken noted that CTM is the largest labor federation in Mexico but that it has "a very mixed record." Some of its unions operate legitimately, and others exist only to collect dues from management and prevent the organization of an independent union, he said.

According to Mexican labor law, he said, "if you have a fictional union, it's very easy to prevent a real one from gaining a toehold."

According to the CROC report, approximately 60 employees walked out of the factory after the plant's managers refused to recognize the new union. A majority of the workers have now accepted payments and withdrawn their claims against the company. Coats said the workers could not afford to continue the strike.

Coats himself has not visited the factory. His group maintains contact with Mexican advocacy groups and labor unions, including CROC, and assists with outreach to U.S. corporations and media.

The advocacy groups have called on toy maker Mattel, which owns the Barbie brand, to pressure Rubie's to make changes at the factory. In a statement released this month, Mattel said it conducted a preliminary audit of the plant and discovered several violations regarding payment for overtime, training and safety practices.

"Rubie's has submitted a corrective action plan with target dates for compliance and Mattel intends to reaudit the facility to ensure these issues have been addressed," the statement said.