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Student Workers at Hershey Facility Win Back Wages

By The Moscow Times

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HERSHEY, Pennsylvania — Three companies have agreed in a settlement to pay more than $213,000 in back wages to hundreds of foreign students for summer jobs they held at a Hershey candy facility, the U.S. Department of Labor said Wednesday.

The settlement also requires two of the companies to pay fines totaling $148,000.

Hershey, whose sweet treats include Kit Kat and Reese's peanut butter cups, owns the warehouse and distribution center but was not cited for violations because it contracts out the operation of it to another company, Exel, Hershey spokesman Jeff Beckman said.

Westerville, Ohio-based Exel, Lemoyne-based SHS Group and San Clemente, California-based Council for Educational Travel USA agreed to pay $213,042 in back wages to 1,028 foreign students who held summer jobs repackaging candy for promotional displays. The payout is an average of $207 per student.

The three companies overcharged the students for housing, reducing their wages below what they were supposed to be paid, the department said.

Exel agreed to pay $143,000 in fines for excessive workplace noise at the Hershey facility, about 160 kilometers northwest of Philadelphia, to implement a noise abatement plan there and to take steps to ensure compliance with federal workplace rules at its more than 300 other facilities across the country, the department said. SHS was fined $5,000 for repeated violations of labor standards, it said.

In August 2011, more than 100 foreign students who worked at the facility protested, saying they took the jobs in the belief that they would be taking part in a cultural exchange, not working at menial jobs that left them little time or energy to do much else.

One protester, Yana Brenzey, a 19-year-old journalism student from Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine, said she had no idea she would be lifting 18-kilogram boxes or netting only about $200 a week. Other students who protested were from China, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Poland, Romania and Turkey.

Federal officials inspected the companies after the National Guestworker Alliance advocacy group filed a complaint on the students' behalf.

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