



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on August 19, 2011

## Guest Workers Protest Conditions at Hershey Warehouse

While unemployment nationwide remains above nine percent in the United States, the State Department continues to bring in foreign exchange students to work for American employers. And at least some of the students aren't happy about it when they get here.

More than 100 student workers walked off the job for the second straight day yesterday and gathered in front of the Hershey Story Museum in downtown Hershey, Pennsylvania, for a protest demonstration over pay and working conditions at the candy maker's Eastern Distribution Center III in nearby Palmyra. About 400 exchange students from as far away as China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Turkey, and Romania are employed for the summer at the plant, at wages ranging from \$7.25 to \$8.35 an hour. But several of the protestors said lifting heavy boxes in a warehouse all day is not what they expected and that the payroll deductions, including rent for the mandatory company housing, leaves them with barely enough to live on.



"I pick up boxes that are 40 pounds — I weigh 95 pounds," Yana Bzengney, a 19-year-old student from Ukraine, told the [Patriot-News](#) of Harrisburg. She paid \$3,500 for the chance to come to the United States and to see the country and its people and maybe visit New York and Washington, D.C, she said. Instead, she has seen little more than the inside of the warehouse. She goes home exhausted each day to an apartment she shares with four other students, for which about \$400 a month is deducted from her pay. "I complain. I say, 'I want another job.' They say if I do not work here they will cancel my visa and I will go home."

On Wednesday, the National Guestworker Alliance filed a complaint with the State Department, claiming that when student-workers complained about working conditions, including alleged violations of U.S law, "they were threatened with deportation and other long term immigration consequences to remain quiet about the violations." The State Department said it was investigating.

Peng Lu, 21, an economics student from Yunan, China, complained of the heavy boxes the students were required to lift throughout their eight-hour shifts. "Very heavy, sometimes we can't do," Peng told the [New York Times](#). "But they ask, faster, faster," he said. "If you can't, they say, 'Go home.'" One of the students, the *Times* reported, used a mobile phone to record a meeting at the plant last week in which a manager warned them they could be fired and sent home if they took part in protests.



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The warehouse workers are among the 100,000 college students who come to the United States each year on J-1 visas. The program, billed as a means of promoting understanding of people and cultures of different lands, is also a way to supply resorts and other businesses with cheap labor. After their meetings with the Guest Worker Alliance, some of the students came to believe the program was being used to get foreign students to do unskilled manual labor for less than it would cost to hire American workers.

The warehouse is run for the candy manufacturer by Exel, Inc. out of Westerville, Ohio. Exel, in turn, hired SHS Staffing Solutions to hire the students and handle payroll and scheduling. Exel had asked the staffing company to look into the students' complaints. But on Thursday Exel announced it had also instructed SHS not to hire any more J-1 visa student workers for the packing plant after the end of this summer.

The Council for Educational Travel USA, a non-profit company in San Clemente, California, had helped place the students. Rick Anaya, the company's chief executive, said each of the students had signed a job offer that described the work they would do. The offer of jobs at the warehouse specified it would involve "frequent lifting of 24 kilograms," or more than 50 pounds. Students in past years had not found the lifting unduly burdensome, he said. "One of the complaints students have raised is that it is hard work," Anaya said in a written statement. "That may be; we're not sure. But the job offer is self-explanatory."

But some of the students, who paid anywhere from \$3,000 to \$6,000 to participate in the program, were expecting less strenuous work and more opportunity to meet and befriend Americans. One of the workers, a mechanical engineering student from Turkey, said he came to learn about the United States and improve his English. He joked about how little English he hears.

"There are five languages being spoken in this warehouse, none of them is English," he told the *Patriot-News*. But at least one student showed a certain fluency in English, especially when describing his dissatisfaction with the J-1 Visa program. Godwin Efobi, a 26-year-old medical student from the Ukraine, said he paid \$4,000 for the opportunity to work in the United States this summer. He was supposed to have a job in Florida, he said, but when he was told he would have to take the warehouse job in Hershey. "I am paying to work, and that's what sucks," he told the *News-Patriot*.

Anaya told the [Associated Press](#) he believed the idea for the protests did not come from the students. "Somebody has been circulating a letter that they will get several thousand dollars back if they protest and be a part of this movement," he said. "We have not gotten any cooperation from the kids. Somebody is promising them a lot of money in order to participate in this protest."

Many of the students, the *Times* reported are from medical and engineering graduate schools and expected a relaxing summer job, along with opportunities to meet and befriend Americans. They were encouraged, they said, by the website of the council, which shows laughing students on a highway before a panoramic mountain landscape, promising a chance to "live your dream."

On Wednesday, about 150 people picketed outside the warehouse in a protest organized by the National Guestworker Alliance. Pennsylvania AFL-CIO president Rick Bloomingdale and two other organized labor officials were arrested. On Thursday, the students protested with a bullhorn, leaflets, and a petition they planned to present to Hershey executives. Bloomingdale called the conditions described by the students as "a throwback to the company town of 100 years ago."

According to the [Patriot-News](#), this is not the first time exchange students have complained about



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conditions at the warehouse. Last winter several Brazilian students complained to a reporter about their jobs and their dissatisfaction with the J-1 Visa program, but refused to speak on the record for fear of reprisals, the paper said.

"An Associated Press investigation of the visa program, published last December, found students who were forced to work in strip clubs instead of restaurants, others taking home \$1 an hour or even less, some living in crowded apartments or eating on floors," the AP noted in its report on the Hershey demonstrations. "Members of Congress have expressed concern about misuse of the program."

*Photo: A smoke stack of the Hershey chocolate plant is seen in Hershey, Pa.: AP Images*



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