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# Pleas Unheeded as Students' U.S. Jobs Soured

By JULIA PRESTON

The college student from Moldova was in the United States on a cultural exchange program run for half a century by the federal government, a program designed to build international understanding by providing foreign students with a dream summer of fun in America. So he summoned his best English for the e-mail he sent to the State Department in June.

“Pleas hellp,” wrote the student, Tudor Ureche. He told them about “the miserable situation in which I’ve found myself cought” since starting a job under the program in a plant packing Hershey’s chocolates near the company’s namesake town in Pennsylvania.

Students like Mr. Ureche, who had paid as much as \$6,000 to take part in the program, expected a chance to see the best of this country, to make American friends and sightsee, with a summer job to help finance it all.

Instead, many students who were placed at the packing plant found themselves working grueling night shifts on speeding production lines, repeatedly lifting boxes weighing as much as 60 pounds and financially drained by low pay and unexpected extra costs for housing and transportation. Their complaints to the contractor running the program on behalf of the State Department were met with

threats that they could be sent home.

Events this summer at the Hershey packing plant in Palmyra, Pa., revealed major holes in the State Department's oversight of its summer work and travel program, the largest and most ambitious of its cultural exchanges. The program, which placed 130,000 foreign students in all sorts of jobs across the country this year, has a large impact in shaping the country's image for young generations overseas.

The Hershey students finally got the department's attention on Aug. 17 when 200 of them, waving placards and chanting union slogans, [walked out of the plant](#), the first labor protest in the 50-year history of the department's exchange programs.

The protests raised questions about whether the State Department is equipped to manage what has become a vast temporary work program, especially in times when suitable jobs for foreign students — even short-term jobs — are harder to come by as high unemployment persists in the United States.

The protests also exposed serious lapses by the [Council for Educational Travel, USA](#), a nonprofit group based in California and one of more than 70 sponsors contracted by the State Department to organize the students' trips to the United States and find jobs and housing for them.

The group, known as Cetusa, placed nearly 400 foreigners from 18 countries, many of them graduate students in medicine, engineering and economics, in physically arduous jobs at the Palmyra factory that were overwhelming for some.

The students, who were earning about \$8 an hour, said they were isolated within the plant, rarely finding moments to practice English or socialize with Americans. With little explanation or accounting, the sponsor took steep deductions from their paychecks for housing, transportation and insurance that left many of them too little money to afford the tourist wanderings they had eagerly anticipated.

Program documents and interviews with 15 students show that Cetusa failed to heed many distress signals from students over many months, and responded to some with threats of expulsion from the program.

## **A Cry for Help**

Mr. Ureche, 22, an engineering student, said he had begun to appeal to Cetusa for a different job as soon as he went to work lifting boxes loaded with Hershey's candies.

"I've been having serious back pains since the first day of work," Mr. Ureche reported in his e-mail to the State Department on June 6, sent two weeks after he started on the job. "If I continue in this rhythm of work, it may cause me serious health damages."

He felt "mistreated and ignored by my sponsor," he wrote. And the organization told him, he said, that if he complained to Washington, "they will immediately cancel my visa." A few days later Mr. Ureche quit his job, making his way to New York and finding work.

When the walkout came two months later, State Department officials reacted swiftly, opening an investigation centering on Cetusa that has not yet concluded.

The department was already on notice about trouble in the program, after an [Associated Press investigation](#) last year found abuses of foreign students in several states. Officials started a broad review earlier this year, and on July 15 they inaugurated new regulations, which tighten requirements on sponsor organizations to ensure that students are matched with jobs that are appropriate and safe. A newly expanded staff of 18 inspectors will begin on-site audits of sponsor organizations this fall, officials said.

"We are asking hard questions," said Rick Ruth, the State Department official in charge of cultural exchange programs — including whether the program should be scaled back in light of the hard times in the United States.

Cetusa responded to the protest by arranging for students to have a paid week off from the plant and by paying for two trips to historic sites in Pennsylvania. The Hershey Company hosted a daylong visit to its headquarters so students could learn about its business strategies.

“This is a beautiful, great program,” Rick Anaya, Cetusa’s chief executive, said of the cultural exchange.

Mr. Anaya said he was aware that the work in Palmyra was strenuous. “It is hard to lift,” he said. “But they get used to it and they are fine with it after a week or so.” He said all students had received and signed job descriptions before going to Palmyra. If packing work seemed too difficult, he said, “they didn’t have to sign up for the job.”

Mr. Anaya blamed the discontent on the [National Guestworker Alliance](#), a labor group that helped organize the walkout, together with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and other unions.

“It’s clear and obvious to me that this whole thing was started and fueled by the unions,” he said.

The foreign students’ travails did prove fertile ground for the alliance, an advocate for temporary foreign workers. Joined by some of the students, the alliance since August has led a campaign against the Hershey Company, accusing it of exploiting foreign students to displace American workers. Some students agreed.

“They take students who came on a cultural exchange to slave for them and make next to nothing, when these jobs could be going to families in Pennsylvania,” said Godwin Efobi, 26, a Nigerian medical student who was a protest leader.

Created under a 1961 law, the State Department’s summer work and travel program was designed to give foreign university students who do not hail from wealthy elites at home a brief plunge into American life, at no cost to the American taxpayer. The students come on a visa known as a **J-1**, which allows them to work for up to four months and travel for a month.

Students in the program, a legacy of the cold war, come mainly from China, Russia and Eastern European countries, with some from Latin America. Traditionally they have been employed in national parks, amusement parks, summer camps, beach resorts and restaurants, in low-wage but congenial jobs.

Over the years the program has won many happy reviews after students returned home. But in recent years it grew rapidly, to 150,000 students in 2008 from about 30,000 a decade earlier. It is now bigger than most federal programs explicitly dedicated to importing temporary foreign workers.

As a cultural exchange, the program is not monitored by labor authorities, said Daniel Costa, an analyst at the [Economic Policy Institute](#) in Washington who studies the J-1 program. Unlike the Department of Labor, he said, the State Department does not collect employment data that would show, for example, how many students have been placed in factories like the Palmyra plant, or how recently.

Mr. Anaya said his organization began by sending small numbers of students to Palmyra six years ago, for the annual summertime surge packing Hershey's candies for the Christmas holidays.

Many students were surprised to learn when they arrived that they would not work for Hershey, but for SHS OnSite Solutions, a staffing subcontractor for Exel, the contractor Hershey hired to operate the packing plant.

This summer Cetusa placed nearly 400 students in jobs in which, according to the fine print of the visa papers, the worker "spends 100 per cent of the shift standing, walking, stooping, bending or lifting" and "involved in repetitive motion work," and must be able to "lift up to 27 kilograms throughout the shift" (about 60 pounds) and "function effectively" in a cold room.

### **'This Is America'**

Many students — including many who left Hershey before the labor groups arrived — said the jobs were an immersion in misery.

Ignacio Torres Sibaja, a 21-year-old graphic arts student, said he started to weep when he read news about the walkout from his home in Costa Rica as he recalled three months when he worked in Palmyra last winter.

“I spent some of the worst moments of my life during that exchange,” Mr. Torres said. Speaking by telephone from San José, he said he had applied for a resort job in Colorado, learning only at the last minute that he would go to Palmyra. He did not focus on the job description. He thought working for Hershey would be fun.

A partner organization of Cetusa in Costa Rica had assured him he would earn back the \$4,000 he borrowed from his parents to pay airfare and charges by Cetusa for his visa and their fees, Mr. Torres said. But that partner went out of business days after he arrived in the United States. With no guidance from either group, Mr. Torres spent two sleepless days, including one night he passed in a mall, finding a bus from Kennedy Airport to Harrisburg, Pa., where Cetusa has an office.

A representative of the sponsor greeted him with a demand for \$800 to cover a rental deposit on an apartment, Mr. Torres said. The agency provided small apartments, often 15 miles away in Harrisburg, charging each student \$400 a month to live in cramped quarters with four or five others.

Mr. Torres turned over all the spending money — \$500 — he had scraped together for the trip. “I spent a week not eating,” he said.

At the plant, Mr. Torres said, “the packing line gets really, really fast and stressful.” Even though the plant was chilled below 60 degrees, he said, “I would be sweating all over.”

Mr. Torres echoed many students when he said his lowest moment came with his first paycheck. After deductions by Cetusa for rent, utilities, bus fare and other items, he took home \$85 for 35 hours of work.

“You wanted a cultural exchange,” Mr. Torres was told by the group representative, he said. “This is America and this is the way we do things here.” Although Cetusa is a nonprofit organization in the United States, commercial affiliates manage housing and insurance for its international student programs.

Mr. Torres finished his job too broke to travel in the United States, he said, and went home in debt, feeling cheated.

## **Hoping to Be Fired**

In June, a student from China, Tian Jia Yi, started on the packing line at the Hershey plant. Mr. Tian, 20, a hotel management student at a college in Qingdao, quickly discovered that the work was too much for him.

“My supervisor always ordered us to carry these chocolate boxes every day that were too heavy,” Mr. Tian said in a telephone interview, striving to express himself in correct English. After he pleaded for weeks for a different task, he said, a manager fired him.

“In a stupid way it was my dream that she would fire me because I can’t bear that work anymore,” he said.

Cetusa offered Mr. Tian a new job in California — but he had no money to travel there. Then the organization ordered him to leave his Pennsylvania apartment. Stranded and alone, he managed to locate a relative in Flushing, Queens, and retreated there to search, unavailingly, for a new job.

“I feel very ashamed that I have to spend a lot of money that my parents sent to me,” Mr. Tian said.

Under program regulations, sponsors are required to monitor their students throughout their stay here. But according to State Department officials, Mr. Anaya told them shortly after the walkout that his organization had not received any complaints from Palmyra before the protest.

Mr. Torres, however, recalled a gathering in March when dozens of students assailed Cetusa representatives with their grievances. “Everybody rose up and starting confronting them,” he said. In early August, a representative of the organization, Malgorzata Tekgoz, worked a night shift at the Palmyra plant to assess conditions there.

“It was fine, of course I got tired at the end of the shift,” she reported in an e-mail. She said students

had raised “many standard complaints,” particularly about “the frequency of lifting boxes.”

With some students who pressed their case, Cetusa played tough. When the agency learned that Mr. Ureche had complained to the State Department, it terminated his participation in the program, putting him in violation of his visa, according to correspondence between Alan J. Leahy, a lawyer for the organization, and a labor lawyer Mr. Ureche contacted, Laurence E. Norton.

Still, dozens of foreign students employed at the Palmyra plant did not join the protests, State Department officials noted. Some had returned this summer for a second tour there.

Lenka Vavrova, 23, a student from Slovakia, told Cetusa in an e-mail that she was “ashamed of who some of these students are.” She wrote, “We came here for a short time so we should respect the conditions and laws.”

Mr. Anaya said he was convinced the demonstrators had been “misled and sold a bill of goods that is unfair to them” by the labor groups. “I do believe in the kids,” he said. “I believe eventually they will feel sorry for what they did.”

Saket Soni, director of the National Guestworker Alliance, said mobilizing the students had not been hard. “We talked about fundamental labor and civil rights protections that cover these students, and all workers in America,” he said. After the walkout, Exel, the contractor, said it would no longer use J-1 students at Palmyra.

Mr. Ureche said he remained disappointed by his experience here. “The students are not cheap workers,” he said. “They are coming here to meet new people, make some money for travel. This program is not for living without food, without money, without nothing.”

*Alain Delaquérière contributed reporting.*



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