

FT.com site : **Barbie clothes maker accused over child labour.**

Sara Silver in Tepeji del Rio, Mexico

392 words

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A month-long labour dispute at a Mexican factory making costumes under the Barbie label, licensed by the US toy manufacturer Mattel, has led to allegations that workers as young as 13 were employed making the costumes sold throughout the US and Europe.

Mattel says it is investigating the allegations and admits that it has identified, through an internal audit, one 15-year-old working at the factory in Tepeji del Rio, north of Mexico City.

With most garment jobs fleeing to central America and Asia, those production plants remaining in Mexico are supposed to guarantee good employment laws.

The manufacturer, Rubie's of New York, which denies the use of child labour at the plant, has subsidiaries in the UK, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Japan. Rubie's makes costumes under licence for superhero dolls ranging from Batman and Superman to movie characters such as Harry Potter.

Teresita de Jesus Hernandez is one of four 15-year-olds among the workers protesting daily in front of the Rubie's Mexican factory. She said she knew she was too young to work legally, but claims the factory manager told her to lie about her age.

"I'm here because I need the money for my family, since my father doesn't live with us anymore," said Teresita, whose pay slips and birth certificate show that she worked at the plant for more than a year.

Trade unionists say that 10 of the 65 workers involved in the dispute were aged 13-15 and that the company did not respect Mexican law - requiring permission and with overtime prohibited - when employing 14- and 15-year-olds.

Salvador Sanchez, a Mexico City lawyer representing Rubie's, said he had copies of the girls' birth certificates showing they were not under age.

"From the US, we're not going to fool around with under-age workers", said J.C. Clausen, a production manager at Rubie's in New York. He said the labour dispute was caused by a feud between vying unions. "If we want to pay less, we'll send work to India or China."

Mattel requires suppliers and licensees to respect workers' right to free association and to employ only workers who are at least 16.

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