



Labor Rights (Sweat Shops)



What is a sweatshop?

Many people throughout the world work in garment factories that have substandard working conditions; such factories have been identified as being sweatshops.

Though each sweatshop is unique, of course, several possible criteria have been used to determine if a factory is indeed a sweatshop. Among the characteristics of sweatshops are low wages, especially those that do not meet employees basic needs; long hours, often with forced, unpaid overtime; opposition to the formation of labor unions; punishment for going to school at night; sexual harassment; forced contraception; termination of employment due to pregnancy; and a dangerous working environment, which could include inadequate ventilation, inadequate emergency equipment and exits, and other conditions that violate the Occupational Safety and Health Act, better known as OSHA.

Why do sweatshops exist?

The people who own and operate sweatshops make money by selling the garments to big name apparel companies at a higher price than it took the sweatshop laborers to make the garment. Big retail chains then buy the garments from the apparel companies and mark the price up even more. Thus, if the retail chain says it will not pay very much, the retail company can't pay very much, either, and the sweatshop owner has to produce the garment as cheaply as possible. The owner reverts to substandard conditions in order to make enough money for him or herself.

Five department store chains in the United States control almost 66% of the department store sales in the United States, according to Mother Jones magazine. Thus, they have great power over the apparel companies and the conditions in the factories that make the garments. If the department stores demanded better conditions, they have great leverage to accomplish the eradication of sweatshops. However, if they demand lower prices, they get them--along with egregious working environments for the people who make the clothes.

Where are sweatshops located?

Locally: On September 6, 2001, a protest was held outside Fashion 21, a Los Angeles store operated by Forever 21, a popular young womens clothing brand. 19 workers allege that they make garments for Forever 21 in factories, which have substandard working conditions, including:

- Sub minimum wages
- No overtime
- 10-12 hour work days
- A requirement that workers had to take work home
- Dirty, unsafe factories with rats and cockroaches
- No potable water
- No health insurance.

The Los Angeles Times reported on September 7, 2001, that it is alleged that contractors altered employees' time cards to show that they worked fewer hours than they actually had. It

added that workers claim that coworkers who had complained of these conditions to state investigators were fired. A lawsuit against Forever 21 has been filed by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center.

On November 16, 1999, Sweatshop Watch reported that the Asian Pacific American Legal Center had filed a lawsuit against the J.H. Design Group, a Los Angeles company which sewed jackets for universities such as USC, UCLA, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Notre Dame. They also produced jackets for Nike, Reebok, Disney, NASCAR, the NBA, the NFL, MLB, and the NHL. Workers claimed they were:

- Working seven days a week, 10-12 hours per day
- Being forced to take work home, working evenings as well, to meet their strict quotas
- Receiving sub minimum wages, often without overtime pay
- Subject to illegal firings for speaking out against sweatshop conditions
- Subject to verbal abuse and racial slurs.

The Los Angeles Times reported on this factory as well.

Perhaps the most famous Los Angeles area sweatshop case is that of the El Monte factory which employed Thai workers, most of them women, in conditions of virtual slavery. The factory was operated from 1989 to 1995. The owners convinced immigrants to come to their factory from Thailand, immigrating illegally. The workers were kept at the factory by guards and barbed wire, paid as little as 60 cents an hour, according to their lawyer, Julie Su. Disney, Bloomingdales, and Hechts sold clothes from El Monte. B.U.M., Mervyns, Montgomery Ward, Miller's Outpost, Tomato, and LF Sportswear were sued in connection with the case.

Nationally and Internationally: The Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE) has identified sweatshops in Guatemala (making Van Heusen dress shirts), Manhattan (making clothing sold at the department store Lord & Taylor), the Dominican Republic (making caps for Nike and Champion bearing the logos from several major universities in the United States), and Kentucky (making uniforms for the U.S. Defense Department to sell to military personnel) on their website. Many others exist throughout the world.

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