



© CARA METZ—UNITE

You Are What You Wear

By Sarah Wildman

Take off your clothes. A random sampling of your garment labels probably reads: Made in Honduras, Manufactured in Vietnam, Assembled in Macao. In buying and washing our shirts and jeans, nightgowns and we rarely notice these words.

But behind these tiny tags is the complex story of Third World economies in which the welfare of employees is routinely sacrificed on the altar of profit. In developing countries around the world women and girls, in sweatshops reminiscent of those a century ago, work endless days in dark rooms for below-subsistence pay, sometimes sexually abused by their employers, sometimes fired when they become pregnant.



These conditions, which taint products in many of our most popular stores, have become the cause celebre of activists, union representatives, and government officials—who together have tried to exert pressure on companies to comply with humane employment standards. But those involved all

agree that the critical force in fostering this change will be the conscience of the informed consumer.

“Sweatshops have been with us since time immemorial. It is critically important for the health and safety of workers that our community—particularly women—pay attention to what they buy and where it was made,” says Manhattan borough president and New York City mayoral candidate Ruth Messinger.

"SWEAT-FREE" ENFORCEMENT

However well mapped out, the route is clearly not well paved. First World retail companies, struggling to keep up with constantly shifting consumer desires and cost-cutting retailers, hire manufacturers in "Third World" countries where work is cheap. Each country has its own story of horror. According to dispatches from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Salvadoran workers "find themselves in worse conditions than before industrialization." Their counterparts in Sri Lanka "live like animals in makeshift huts that house up to 60 workers, without any sanitary installations."

Indeed, the task of monitoring the standards of such an industry is overwhelming. The controls imposed by labor advocates like the unions and the United States Department of Labor—which break down even in such urban manufacturing areas as New York's Chinatown—are entirely meaningless outside American borders. Not only are companies free from the humanitarian labor laws in the United States; they are also far from the watchful cameras of the media, and the subsequent heightened consumer-consciousness.

Furthermore, many questions about the code itself arise. For instance, who determines what a "minimum" wage shall be? Who chooses the monitors of human rights? Governments? Clergy? The companies themselves? As the accords stand right now, monitors will be hired by companies to watch over their own factories.

Such factors have led the National Labor Committee, which applauded the accord, to temper its praise. "[It] needs to be strengthened in a really profound way in order to make sense," said spokeswoman Ellen Braune, pointing to ambiguous definitions in the accord of such terms as "independent monitoring" and "living wage."

Even labor issues that consumers might directly act on—for example, finding out which manufacturers support the code of conduct and then buying their goods—are less straightforward than one might assume. Nike, Inc., for instance, has participated in "No Sweat" meetings since early last summer, yet in the February 1997 issue of *Free Labor World*, a London-based newspaper published by the ICFTU, Nike was blasted for farming out its manufacturing to subcontractors in notoriously non-democratic and anti-union countries. Questioned, Nike's response was, "We're just buyers; we don't control what goes on in the factories." Now Nike has signed on to the code of conduct. Now we, as consumers, can watch for the impact of Nike's latest switch.

The key, of course, is consumer response—how we react at Bloomingdale's or Baby Gap. Activists in the 1970s and 1980s created in the American mind a compelling link between grapes and the suffering of farmworkers in the Southwest and in Central and South America, inspiring a national consumer boycott and an industry response. Likewise must the American public respond now: If Nike

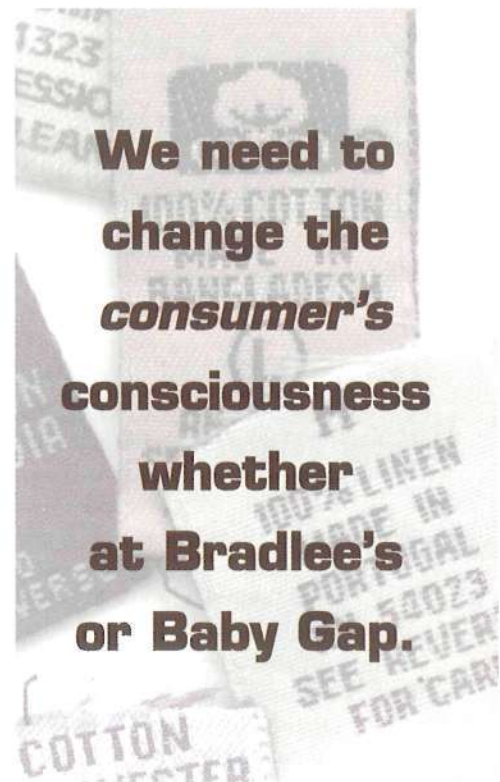
knows its consumers will not buy goods produced by sweatshop labor, they are likelier to change working conditions.

The ready-to-wear clothing industry, an innovation of the 19th century, was built on the backs of laborers with no options. With no "homeland" to which they could return, the daughters of Russian and Eastern European immigrants worked in tiny, ill-lit and poorly ventilated rooms. Fire escapes and windows were locked to prevent workers from taking "illegal" breaks. More than 80 years later, similar working conditions have been reported in Thailand, El Salvador, and even Los Angeles.

Eighty years ago, Jewish immigrant women, incensed by the intolerable conditions and influenced by the socialism they learned in the Old World, demanded *mentshlekhe bahndlung* (humane treatment), staged walk-outs and courted unions. Today, while workers in similar situations have little presence in the American arena, the organizations that supported workers then, including the National Council of Jewish Women and the Women's City Club of New York, continue in the public battle on their behalf.

In 1993, the Department of Labor launched the "No Sweat" initiative enlisting all members of the garment industry. The DOL had discovered that though it had hundreds of enforcement agents, they were virtually impotent without the compliance of the retailers and manufacturers. A three-pronged approach was implemented: enforcement of labor laws, public acknowledgment of complying companies as what they termed "trendsetters," and public education, an initiative that many Jewish and labor organizations have tapped into. The image has flipped: Descendants of turn-of-the-century garment workers are now the consumers rather than laborers, perhaps in a better position to improve the worker's lot.

But while the DOL's tagging of "trendsetters" may provide some guide to the consumer, even these companies must constantly be reevaluated. This Spring Guess Inc., a Los Angeles-based clothing company and former trendsetter, was placed on probation by the Department of Labor for sub-par monitoring practices. UNITE estimates that approximately



3,000 workers were toiling for Guess in "filthy, cramped, [and] overheated" shops where workers were not paid minimum wage. Guess has made public motions toward ameliorating the situation after student and church groups demanded a boycott of their products.

In 1996, the sweatshop issue was pushed into public discourse with the "outing" of the clothing line endorsed by morning talk-show host Kathie Lee Gifford. After discovering

her clothing line was partially produced in a Honduran plant accused of labor violations, Gifford took to the stump, declaring that abolishing sweatshops is "nothing less than critical for the entire garment industry."

In the fall of 1996, concerned groups pushed to educate consumers about unethical labor practices in the garment industry. Organized by the National Council of Jewish Women, a coalition of labor and women's groups began working with New York State and federal officials to force sweatshops into daily discourse. In March, a "No Sweatshopping Day" had volunteers fanning out up Manhattan's East Side armed

with "care tags" and a script, asking store owners if they keep tabs on how their merchandise is created. Though the sponsors were heavily sprinkled with Jewish affiliates, including the American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, Jewish Labor Committee, NCJW, they declared it a universal cause. "Caring for our fellow woman and man is a Jewish

ethic, [as is the importance of] creating a community with none who are oppressed," said Roberta Pincus, past president of the NCJW.

Lois Waldman, director of the Commission for Women's Equality at the American Jewish Congress, points out that simultaneously AJCongress was pressing its members to exercise their rights by bringing up these issues at annual stockholders meetings. "Stockholders asking for action is a device which gets corporate management to respond while publicizing issues of concern," she said.

This fall the National Labor Committee is sponsoring a national "day of conscience." On Saturday, October 4, cities around the country will host vigils, street theater and letter-writing campaigns in an effort of mass public education.

The stickier layer of the issue is in the worldwide cultural differences that this crusade touches upon. Protesting human rights violations connects to a Westernized moral code that is culturally and class specific. But in many of these countries, such treatment of workers is the standard and may be viewed, even by the workers themselves, as unremarkable. Addressing the sweatshop issue isolates only a small part of a more complex problem.

The Apparel Industry Partnership is an important step in both publicizing and politicizing the issue. Consumers must approach their purchasing power as exactly that, a power that can be wielded with force.

"A woman called me the other day asking if L.L.Bean was a member of the partnership," said Linda Golodner, relating a tale of proactive consumerism. "She and her husband are older and it's easier for them to shop through catalogues. She wanted to be sure that she could support the company." Golodner was happy to tell her that L.L. Bean is, in fact a Department of Labor "trendsetter." Happy because consumers like these are, finally, the key players in the Apparel Industry Partnership. ■

Sarah Wildman is a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C.



For further information

- The Department of Labor's home page: <http://www.dol.gov>. A link to "No Sweat" takes you to options including Shopping Clues, Fashion Trendsetters, Garment Enforcement Reports and public service announcements.
- UNITE, Steve Nutter (213)830-5498; Christina Vasquez or Jo-Ann Mort (212)686-4551
- For a list of No Sweat retailers and manufacturers, write to NO SWEAT, U.S. Department of Labor, 200 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20210; fax (202)219-8740.
- For an extensive bibliography on the Jewish labor movement (and women's roles), send a SASE with two 32-cent stamps to the Jewish Labor Committee, 25 E. 21st St., New York, NY 10010
- National Labor Committee
Charles Kernaghan (212)242-0986
- Employment Standards Administration
(202)219-8743
- National Consumers League, 1701 K St., NW,
#1200, Washington, DC 20006 (202)835-3323