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SWEAT-FREE SHOPPING GAINS MOMENTUM

Consumers have even more sweat-free options this holiday season than ever before. One year after the historic launching of the "Shop with a Conscience" sweat-free purchasing guide, the list of sweat-free retailers has grown to eleven retailers, up from eight last year. All retailers on the list sell clothes made by workers represented by a democratic union or a worker-owned cooperative. Featuring a variety of apparel from overalls to yoga pants, from T-shirts to camisoles, and even underwear, the guide is a resource for consumers who want quality apparel at fair prices that is also sweatshop-free.

"For people who have scoffed at the viability of sweat-free producers, the growth of this list is proving them wrong. In fact, the guide is one of the most popular pages on our website. This year, consumers can build the momentum of the anti-sweatshop movement while shopping for the holidays," says Alejandra Domenzain of Sweatshop Watch.

For years, anti-sweatshop organizations have supported worker-led campaigns demanding that retailers take responsibility for ending sweatshop abuses in the garment industry. Many of these struggles resulted in unionization or worker-owned cooperatives, where workers share ownership of the factory. "We must remember that the places listed on this sweat-free guide came out of the brave resistance of workers demanding to be treated with dignity and respect," says Bjorn Claeson of SweatFree Communities. He continues, "Every sweat-free purchase helps workers maintain the good wages and working conditions they have achieved through hard work and long struggle."

Fuerza Unida, a sewing cooperative in San Antonio, Texas, was formed in 1990, after Levi Strauss & Co. unexpectedly announced it was closing its Zarcamora Street factory. Laid-off workers decided to form the cooperative, which today makes quality tote bags, pillows, and bedding. According to co-founder Viola Casares, "Co-ops are necessary here in the U.S. because we are losing so many jobs," referring to the impact of NAFTA and resulting job loss in garment manufacturing in the U.S. She adds, "Major retailers don't care how the clothes are made or who gets hurt."

No Sweat Apparel, also in the sweat-free guide, sources its T-shirts from Just Garments, one of the first unionized garment shops in El Salvador. According to Just Garments worker, Christi, "Here it is very different. Oh yes. Here they don't pressure us so much, they pay our benefits, they don't insult us...we're making constant progress."

Justice Clothing, the union-made clothing retailer, sources from Kenneth Gordon, a shirt-making factory in New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina hit, the factory was forced to close, but has kept all its union employees on the payroll during the factory's reconstruction. The company is committed to reopening with full staffing as soon as possible.

"These sweat-free companies operate in a completely different way than large multinational retailers. In an industry characterized by flagrant abuses, including substandard wages, extremely long working hours with no overtime pay, locked bathrooms, factory closure without notice, and employer abuse, buying from a sweat-free retailer is another way for consumers to say no to sweatshop exploitation," says Allie Robbins of United Students Against Sweatshops.

The anti-sweatshop network that created the "Shop with a Conscience" guide includes Sweatshop Watch, SweatFree Communities, International Labor Rights Fund, United Students Against Sweatshops, and Peace through Interamerican Community Action (PICA). The guide has been updated for the 2005 shopping season and can be accessed online at <http://www.sweatshopwatch.org/index.php?s=59>.

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