The International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) is pleased to announce a new pilot project to enable labor advocates in four countries to monitor factory conditions. We will work together with local partners in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Taiwan to monitor conditions in factories producing university-licensed apparel. We will also work with local NGOs and trade unions in Indonesia to monitor factories producing shoes and garments for companies involved in the Fair Labor Association.

The problem of sweatshops in the garment industry is now widely known. An active consumer movement has emerged in the US and Europe to oppose the production of garments, shoes and other consumer items under sweatshop conditions. Consumers have demanded accountability by retailers of the goods they buy, and both activists and retailers have separately and jointly proposed several systems to monitor labor practices in factories worldwide. The array of monitoring programs developed in the past few years is dizzying. The Fair Labor Association, the Ethical Trading Initiative, and Social Accountability 8000 are just a few names of such programs. Some may work, some may not. Concerned worker rights advocates need to pay close attention to all these programs, and to learn what they can from the successes and failures of each.

The International Labor Rights Fund has long campaigned to end the abuse of workers worldwide and to eliminate sweatshops. We have promoted independent monitoring as a partial solution to the sweatshop program, most notably through the Rugmark program. We have also critiqued monitoring programs, such as the ILO's program in Pakistan, where we felt those programs did not have sufficient input or representation from the communities they affected, or provide sufficient safeguards against fraud.

We believe monitoring can be an effective tool to protect workers from abuse and ultimately to empower them. However, it is critically important that workers themselves, and local grassroots advocates for workers (i.e. non-governmental organizations, including trade unions) have a role in the monitoring process. It is also critically important that systematic channels of communication be established between allies in consumer and producer countries.

We have supported the development of the Fair Labor Association (FLA), a US-based program that has brought human rights and consumer advocates together with manufacturers, and we will work to ensure that the FLA accredit worker advocacy groups as monitors, and that companies participating in the FLA work with these monitors to correct labor rights abuses. However, in order to participate in this or any other monitoring process, it is vitally important that worker advocates in producer countries have full information about this and other relevant monitoring schemes, and that they have the knowledge base necessary to participate in the programs as monitors.

Our allies in many producer countries currently do not have complete information about monitoring schemes and protocols, nor yet about the range of groups in consumer countries involved in this issue. Furthermore, in many cases they do not have sufficient staff capacity to play a systematic role as factory monitors. Therefore, we have designed this project to ensure that local organizations can develop the skills...
necessary to fulfill the monitoring protocols of the FLA or any similar program. The participating organizations are under no obligation to participate in the FLA. We note that other programs being developed, such as a proposal by United Students Against Sweatshops, rely on NGOs to conduct monitoring. Those organizations trained by this program will ideally be capable of participating in any such program. Moreover, they may choose to watchdog, from the outside, the FLA or other monitoring programs without participating in them. In any case, we believe the more information and the more knowledge of production practices and labor problems local advocates have, the more capably they can work from either outside or inside to ensure that monitoring programs truly address the needs of workers.

This project will develop, in cooperation with local worker advocacy organizations, a training program on local labor laws, international labor standards, occupational safety and health, wage and hour inspections, discrimination and harassment and other labor relations practices. It will provide a thorough training to those interested in playing a role as factory monitors in all these subjects as well as basic social science research techniques, including techniques to gather information about wages and basic needs. Finally, it will involve trainees in a pilot audit of factories producing garments and shoes for the US market, to create a baseline survey of labor conditions in those industries in the producer country.

As participants in the project begin actual monitoring activities, the project will create a communications model between the NGOs involved in producer countries, NGOs in the US, the FLA or other monitoring accreditation programs, and relevant company counterparts to permit rapid response to violations.

Source URL: http://www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/news/11032