In late July, state investigators began conducting "sweeps" to track down businesses that violate labor laws and evade taxes. The sweeps first targeted the garment industry, where flagrant health, safety, and labor violations are prevalent. Initiated as part of California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's newly fashioned Economic and Employment Enforcement Coalition [EEEC], the sweeps were created to "shut down" the underground economy. However, the sweeps alarmed many garment workers, and failed to remedy the injustices workers experience in Los Angeles' sweatshops.

Teams of investigators searched the garment factories housed in the downtown Los Angeles office buildings. Garment workers were confused and intimidated by the sweeps because the Agency did not outreach nor distribute materials to the workers beforehand explaining the purpose of the raids. When some workers arrived to work, they were told by their employers to leave immediately because "immigration authorities" were coming to deport them, even though U.S. labor laws protect workers regardless of their immigration status. In some cases, investigators interviewed workers about their workplace conditions near the factories, where they are often afraid to talk for fear of being fired.

"The Labor Commissioner's investigators came in and pressured us to tell them how much we make, whether we get lunch and rest breaks, and what other conditions we work under. I didn't want to say anything because I have seen employers fire workers for saying too much to the investigators" says Maria, a garment worker.

As news of the sweeps spread, factories shut down during the day to avoid inspection, leaving workers alarmed and without employment. Other workers returned to their factories late in the evening,
Country Profile: A Glance at the Philippines

Sweatshop Watch strives to promote international solidarity by spreading awareness of workers’ struggles around the world. This article is contributed by Ramon Martinez of PROLABOR in the Philippines.

The Philippines is a country of 87.9 million people, 43.9 million male and 44 million female. Of the 53.5 million who are aged 15 and older, 35.86 million comprise the entire labor force in which 32 million are classified as employed: 10.992 in agriculture; 5.2 million in industry; 15.989 in services and the rest are in private households.

A worker’s basic minimum wage is pegged at $4.248 USD for an eight (8) hours worked. On the other hand, National Statistics Office data shows that as of June 2005, the daily cost of living amounts to $9.225 USD for a family of six (6). The wage deficit is 117.16% of the daily wage or $4.977 USD, which is equivalent to 237.88 in Philippine Peso. Indeed, poverty is on the rise, especially amongst workers and their families.

Filipino workers’ productivity is a wealth being extracted by the imposition of low wages, forced overtime, hazardous working conditions, threats to job and life security, gender inequality and exploitation, sexual harassments against women, child labor, curtailment of labor rights, trade union harassments and much more. These are the concrete outcomes of the neo-liberal economic policies of globalization implemented in the Philippines. Neo-liberal economic policies include cutting government subsidies in social services for the public like healthcare and education, privatizing social services and utilities leading to often unaffordable prices of basic goods and services like water and medicine, and limiting workers’ rights in order to attract foreign investment. The result is clear: the poor becoming poorer and the rich richer. The Philippine Export Zone Authority (PEZA) boasted that in 2002 the 89 Philippine free trade zones (FTZs) are spread across the 15 of the 79 provinces, are home to over one thousand exporting firms, which accounted for 80% of total export from the Philippines which worth USD23.93 billion.

PEZA however, does not mention the conditions in these FTZs, rather it refers to the FTZs as “industrial parks” and “science and technology parks.” These areas look as if they are “modern garrisons” for the workers employed by the Japanese, Americans, Koreans, Dutch, British, Singaporean, Malaysian, Germans and Filipino investors. Given the harsh conditions under which millions of workers labor, the Filipino workers know they have a right to organize themselves and fight for their just wages and decent work. Their worsening economic and political conditions further enflames their burning desire to get organized and fight for the enjoyment of rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, at the least, a decent work. Aware that union organizing is like a “life and death” endeavor, the rich experience of the Philippine labor movement provides them lessons and methods on how to cope with the hardships and life dangers in union organizing work.

Filipino workers realize their collective action is the source of their strength, but also understand they need support from other organized labor and institutions. Workers are strong enough to use whatever resources they have to painstakingly organize with patience, perseverance, and clear vision that in the near future they will emerge victorious from putrefying globalization.

In this context, the Filipino workers express solidarity with all the workers of the world and call for unity and support for the struggle for a decent work and safe work; and make poverty a history. For your solidarity and support: email address: prolabor.phils@yahoo.com.ph. Contact Nitz Mahinay, Executive Director, PROLABOR, 33-B E. Rodriguez Ave., Quezon City, Philippines.
Beyond Sweeps
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working night shifts and irregular hours due to the sweeps. While the Agency meant to address exploitation in the underground economy, the sweeps did little to protect workers’ rights and failed to address retrieving backwages for workers. The sweeps generated confusion and led to greater job instability for garment workers. "We [the workers] are the ones who pay the price of our employer's violations" says garment worker Guadalupe.

On August 8, 2005, garment workers responded by protesting at the site of the first building targeted by the Agency. At the protest, workers expressed their frustration about the sweeps, which they felt do little to change the conditions in the garment industry.

In partnership with other workers' rights groups, Sweatshop Watch responded by issuing a press statement to publicize hotlines for workers and demanding answers from the Department of Labor Standards and Enforcement (DLSE) on the status of the sweeps.

While vigorous enforcement of labor laws is essential to eliminate sweatshops, workers rights advocates question the effectiveness of sweeps or other sporadic investigations, and instead urge the Agency to focus on field enforcement.

"The sweeps only target the factory owners, but let the real perpetrators off the hook: the clothing retailers and manufacturers who profit most from sweatshops," explains Rini Chakraborty, Sweatshop Watch's Executive Director. "These companies should also be held responsible."

In 1999, Sweatshop Watch led the fight to pass AB 633, the nation’s toughest corporate responsibility law. One key provision dictates that manufacturers ensure workers in their sub-contracted factories are paid minimum wage and overtime. "If the State is truly interested in stopping sweatshops, then it should focus on enforcing AB 633," says Alejandra Domenzain, Associate Director of Sweatshop Watch.

Resources


The paper discusses the main elements related to purchasing practices of major multi-national retail companies, where little research has been conducted.


To address the elimination of the garment quotas with the end of the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA), the MFA Forum is a multi-stakeholder learning forum for identifying and promoting collaborative strategies for responsibly managing the effects of the end of the MFA on the global garment industry. Several reports have been released including: Collaborative Framework for Guiding Post-MFA Actions, Mapping the End of the MFA, Managing the Transition to a Responsible Global Textiles and Garment Industry, and The Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) Strategic Sourcing Impact: The Private Sector Perspective.

Immigrant Workers at Risk: The Urgent Need for Improved Workplace Safety & Health Policies & Programs. By AFL-CIO. Available at http://www.aflcio.org/issues/civilrights/immigration/ns09012005.cfm

The new report finds alarming rates of workplace injuries and fatalities amongst immigrant workers. It offers 13 recommendations on how to improve health and safety protections for immigrant workers.

Workshop: Wal-Mart’s “Always” Low Prices & Global Production. By Esperanza Martinez (UCLA Community Scholars Program) and Karin Mak (Sweatshop Watch)

By following the trail of a T-shirt from a garment worker to the consumer, this interactive workshop demonstrates Wal-Mart's impact on working conditions around the world. For a copy of the workshop outline, contact Sweatshop Watch at 213-748-5945 or kmak@sweatshopwatch.org.
Lajat workers breaking new ground for fair union elections in Mexico

Workers win petition for better working conditions

For over 12 years, the 12,000 workers at Manufacturas Lajat, S.R.L. de C.V. (Lajat) have carried out sewing, laundering, ironing, quality inspection, and finishing operations for brands such as Levi's, Mudd Jeans, Old Navy, GAP, Polo, and Tommy Hilfiger in La Laguna, Mexico, a region that comprises three cities: Gomez Palacio, Torreon and Lerdo.

On January 2005, workers in Lajat Gomez Palacio were told that some of the factory's operations would be shifted to a plant located 6 miles away. Rather than notify local Labor Board (Junta de Conciliacion y Arbitraje) and provide severance as required by law, Lajat told the workers they should “commute,” even though this would mean that workers in the morning shift would have to leave by 5 am in order to start at 7 am, and workers who finished the night shift at 2 am would have the difficult task of arranging transportation back home at that time of night.

This latest violation only aggravated workers’ discontent with Lajat’s failure to provide just and healthy working conditions. Workers regularly use chemicals for stonewashing without any protection. There is no drinking water or enough restrooms, and no lunchroom at the factory, forcing workers to eat on the production floor where stray dust and chemicals contaminate their food. They earn 350 pesos per week ($32 USD) with bonus incentives for punctuality, attendance and production for a potential total of 600 pesos ($55 USD) or more. However, any absence, tardiness, or failure to meet the quota means that workers risk earning below the minimum wage. Many are forced to work for up to 12 hours without paid overtime. Holiday and vacation bonuses are paid with jeans produced at the factory rather than wages.

Workers decided to form the “Coalition of Workers of Manufacturas Lajat” and requested the support of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM). Workers went to the local labor board, which concurred that the factory’s “relocation” had not been carried out in accordance with the law. Further, it was found that Lajat owed government agencies over 130 million pesos ($1.2 million USD) in contributions it failed to make for public benefits, even though Lajat had been discounting up to 25% of workers’ salaries for these purposes.

The workers drafted a petition outlining their demands regarding transportation, working conditions, shifts, safety at work, suspensions and unjustified firings and decided to be absent collectively in order to pressure Lajat to negotiate. In February, Lajat agreed to all points in the petition. Unfortunately, Lajat did not respect this agreement and fired the leaders of the Coalition. CJM's U.S. members, which include Sweatshop Watch, addressed Levi’s representatives (Lajat’s major client) to request an inspection of their suppliers’ plants in Gomez Palacio, which were violating the Mexican labor law and Levi’s code of conduct. After their visit, Levi’s verified workers’ allegations and pressured Lajat to reinstate the illegally fired workers. The workers were re-hired, with three months of back pay.

The struggle for an independent union

Retaliation against workers continued. Lajat has a contract with a CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) union, which the workers allege is a government-affiliated and management-controlled union. Workers allege that CTM union leaders started sexually harassing some of the workers. The workers decided to organize their own independent union, but the Labor Board, acting in complicity with Lajat and the CTM union according to the workers, denied their petition twice. The workers then affiliated with a garment industry union from Mexico City and demanded the right of representation to bargain for a collective contract.

Again, CJM members in the U.S. succeeded in getting both Levi’s and Mudd Jeans (Lajat’s two largest clients) to indicate in writing that if Lajat did not support the workers’ legal freedom of association rights, they would cancel their orders with the factory. To date, workers feel that the Labor Board, the CTM union and Lajat management have not acted in good faith to move the union election process forward, while the Labor Board has prolonged the legal process.

continued on next page...
The role of international solidarity

On August 19, dozens of CJM members and allies marched together shoulder-to-shoulder showing that neither robbery nor threats would stop the international solidarity work that CJM has been doing for sixteen years. CJM members demonstrated in support of the Lajat workers in front of the Labor Board, calling for a fair and democratic process in the union elections in their plant.

In response, the Labor Board President called Mexican immigration officers who tried to arrest and deport some of the International CJM members and guest speakers who were supporting the Lajat workers. The workers stood strong and made clear the authorities would have to arrest everyone if they tried to arrest the international members, effectively forcing them to back down. Sweatshop Watch was among the many groups from several parts of Mexico, the United States, and Canada who continue to support the courageous struggle of Lajat workers.

The campaign is rapidly progressing; still CJM and the Lajat workers need your support. Stay updated by checking out http://www.coalitionforjustice.net/.

OTHER CAMPAIGN UPDATES:

Victory for Trafficked Workers in American Samoa

Recently, the owner of the Daewoosa Samoa sweatshop was found guilty of human trafficking. In 2000, Sweatshop Watch conducted advocacy and media work to support over 200 Chinese and Vietnamese guest workers in American Samoa. Workers at the garment factory experienced slave-like conditions, beatings and near starvation while producing clothes for major retailers like J.C. Penney and Sears. The campaign helped collected over $350,000 in backwages for the workers.

Fila or Fail?

The Clean Clothes Campaigns (CCC) in Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden, are organizing actions to condemn sportswear giant FILA’s record on labor rights. An Indonesian FILA supplier Tae Hwa allegedly left thousands of workers jobless and awaiting severance pay and back wages. For more information and to send a letter to FILA today, go to http://www.cleanclothes.org/companies/fila05-06-27.htm.
Sweatshop Watch visits China: Assembling the pieces along the global supply chain

The "Made in China" label, found commonly on clothes, shoes, toys, and electronics, illustrates elements of the global supply chain. The global supply chain refers to the way corporations manage the production and distribution of their goods, from where raw materials come from, to which factory assembles the goods, to what transportation company ships them to the store where they are sold to consumers. Often American brands work with manufacturers who subcontract with factories in mainland China. Many factories in China are owned and operated by businessmen from Hong Kong, the former British colony located off the Southern coast of China. The Chinese factory workers often toil under sweatshop conditions making goods exported to the United States and sold at giant American stores like Walmart, Target, Disney, etc. For garments, workers earn 1% of the retail price. In June 2005, Sweatshop Watch Project Coordinator/New Voices Fellow Karin Mak went to Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China’s first Special Economic Zone, to build relationships with labor rights groups, hoping to learn more from workers how goods are made and what can be done from the U.S. to support these workers.

In the Chinese garment industry, over 70% of the workforce are young women, 16-22 years old. Workers suffer from similar problems that plague other garment workers around the world: low wages, extremely long working hours, degrading treatment, and health and safety problems in the factory. Similar to garment workers in the U.S., the majority of Chinese garment workers are migrants who move rural provinces of China to industrialized cities. Referred to as dagongmei, or women migrant workers, these workers are more prone to exploitation because they are far away from familial support networks, are unfamiliar with local laws, and work under a migration system that limits their rights.

In China, Sweatshop Watch learned about the resilience of Chinese workers, who lamented over their working conditions, but also challenged their employers. For instance, strikes are not uncommon in the factories. Workers would challenge their employers to respect their rights by holding work stoppages, stopping traffic, or even threatening to jump from buildings. In addition to observing the work of labor groups, Sweatshop Watch also conducted workshops sharing the struggles of American garment workers. In one session, Chinese workers expressed surprise at the conditions in the U.S., a country where they imagined everything to be perfect.

The lack of first-hand information and images about conditions in China also led Sweatshop Watch to pursue a video project with the Chinese workers. The video project consisted of introducing the basics of using a camera so that migrant workers can capture their own stories through video. After learning the basics, workers used the camera to cover various parts of their lives, including environmental problems in Shenzhen, pictures of their family in their rural village, factory dorm conditions, and food stalls where workers eat.

To strengthen the relationships of workers and advocates along the global supply chain, Sweatshop Watch also met with labor solidarity groups in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong non-governmental organizations (NGOs) hold a unique place by targeting Hong Kong-owned factories within the global supply chain. Labor rights groups like Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM) monitor and campaign against corporations that violate worker’s rights, health, safety, welfare, and dignity in China. An example of organizing along the supply chain can be seen in SACOM’s current campaign. In conjunction with the New York-based National Labor Committee, the campaign targets Hong Kong-owned factories in China that subcontract with Disney. Sweatshop Watch also supported the campaign by producing a video with SACOM consisting of several interviews with workers. In the video, Those with Justice, workers share the horrors of workplace injury, the fatigue of extremely long hours and harsh conditions, the pain of being separated from families, the loneliness of factory life, but hope and strength that conditions...
will change. SACOM and NLC demand Disney to disclose where its factories are and to allow workers to play a role in the monitoring factories. For more information and the full report on working conditions in factories making Disney goods, see websites www.sacom.org.hk or www.nlcnet.org.

The advancement of free trade policies has made it much easier for corporations to manage the flow of goods across borders. In fact, major retailers like Wal-Mart have developed extremely complicated systems that are factors in their huge profitability. As globalization increases power to corporations to control their supply chains, Sweatshop Watch envisions developing alliances along those global supply chains, linking all the workers that are impacted by the same corporation to make it accountable. For more resources on Labor & Garment in China and updates on the videos, visit Sweatshop Watch’s new webpage: http://www.sweatshopwatch.org under Globalization & Economic Justice Project.

**China & CAFTA:**

The Bush Administration managed to use a protectionist policy in order to pass a free trade one. The Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) passed in early August by the single vote of Senator Robin Hayes (R-NC), who had initially opposed the trade pact, but switched to support it, on the condition that the U.S. pursue limiting imports on garments and textiles from China. CAFTA eliminates tariffs and quotas between U.S., Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador and the Dominican Republic. It is an extension of the North America Free Trade Agreement, which promotes the interests of corporations in their pursuit of profits and further erodes worker’s rights, environmental protections, social services, and democracy.

The negotiations limiting Chinese imports is a political maneuver to strengthen a free trade agenda that would continue to threaten workers' rights. The trade talks between U.S. and Chinese officials did not even include workers at the table, even though they purportedly address policies that "protect" workers. Meanwhile, major lobbyists representing manufacturers and retailers are weighing in.

With the passage of CAFTA, the Bush Administration is likely to start talks on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which would establish the largest free trade zone. Call your Representative at 202-225-3121 to voice your support for fair trade not free trade. You can see how your Representative voted at http://clerk.house.gov/cgi-bin/vote.asp?year=2005&rollnumber=443.

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**Sweatshop Watch Needs Donations!**

Sweatshop Watch is moving to a new office in October. We would appreciate donations of office furniture or equipment. We are especially in need of:

- bookshelves,
- file cabinets,
- a supply cabinet,
- a microwave,
- a laser printer,
- a fax machine,
- a phone system.

Please contact us at sweatinfo@igc.org or at (213) 748-5945 if you would like to make a donation. Our new address is: 1250 S. Los Angeles Street, Suite #212, Los Angeles, CA 90015. Our phone and fax numbers will remain the same.

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Commentaries, articles, and letters are welcome and should be accompanied with your name, address, and telephone or email.

This newsletter contains action alerts summarizing the campaigns led by other organizations. Sweatshop Watch relies on sponsoring organizations to verify claims. Please contact the sponsoring/authoring organization listed.
Support Sweatshop Watch

Sweatshop Watch has recently partnered with Reader’s Digest so you can purchase your favorite magazines while supporting Sweatshop Watch’s work to end sweatshop exploitation!

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www.sweatshopwatch.org

Join Sweatshop Watch!

Founded in 1995, Sweatshop Watch is a coalition of over 30 organizations, and many individuals, committed to eliminating the exploitation that occurs in sweatshops. Sweatshop Watch serves low-wage workers nationally and globally, with a focus on garment workers in California. We believe that workers should earn a living wage in a safe, decent work environment, and that those responsible for the exploitation of sweatshop workers must be held accountable. Please join us by becoming a member. Either send in this form with a check or make a contribution from our website www.sweatshopwatch.org with your credit card.

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