Workers of the World Unite!
Garment Workers Fight for Justice in the Global Apparel Industry

In Bangladesh: Garment workers protest deadly factory conditions

Thousands of garment workers in Bangladesh took to the streets last May, expressing their frustration and desperation over poverty wages, excessively long hours, and dangerous working conditions inside Bangladesh's garment factories. According to reports from the Europe-based Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), the protests erupted after police shot a worker from the FS Sweater factory in Dhaka, where workers were on strike demanding fairer piece-rates. The rioting spread—leaving two workers dead, hundreds injured, and about 200 factories torched.

The widespread worker demonstrations capped a series of deadly yet preventable tragedies in Bangladesh's garment industry. As reported by CCC, over 150 garment workers in Bangladesh died and hundreds more were injured in five factory disasters since April 2005 that involved fires, blocked exits, and building collapses. In April 2005, the Spectrum-Shahriyar factory collapsed—killing 64 workers and injuring over 70. In February 2006, 61 workers died and 100 were injured in the deadly KTS Textile Industries fire in Chittagong (see "Bangladeshi Garment Workers Perish in Fiery Death Trap" in Sweatshop Watch's Summer 2006 newsletter). Days later, the Phoenix factory collapsed in Dhaka—killing 22 workers and injuring 50 more. That same day in Chittagong, 57 workers at the Imam Group of Industries factory were injured in a stampede caused by an exploding transformer. In March, three women died and 50 workers were injured trying to escape through blocked exits at Sayem Fashions in Gazipur.

Unfortunately, these tragedies are not isolated incidents. Bangladeshi workers, who sew t-shirts and sweaters for consumers halfway across the globe in the US and Europe, routinely face dangerous and deadly working conditions in factories that are reminiscent of 19th century sweatshops. Last year's labor unrest led to a June agreement between Bangladeshi unions and industry representatives and to the formation...
New Congress Holds Promise for Anti-Sweatshop Reforms

The elections last November heralded sweeping changes in the nation’s capital, with Democrats controlling both chambers of Congress for the first time in twelve years and swearing in the first woman House Speaker in history. As the new Congressional leadership focuses on ethics reform, raising the minimum wage, lowering prescription drug prices and more, the tide is favoring long-awaited, anti-sweatshop reforms.

On January 10, 2007, the House of Representatives voted to raise the federal minimum wage for the first time since 1997 – potentially boosting wages for 13 million workers nationwide. US Representative George Miller (D-CA) authored the legislation, which would raise the minimum wage from $5.15 to $7.25 per hour in three increments over two years. Significantly, the bill would also extend the minimum wage increase to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a US territory in the Pacific Ocean notorious for rampant labor abuses and sweatshop conditions. Under the Democrats’ proposal, the Commonwealth’s minimum wage would increase from $3.05 to $7.25 over a four-year period. Over the past decade, Representative Miller has led Congressional efforts to reform labor and immigration laws on the islands – efforts that were blocked by convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff and former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who once called the Northern Marianas a “perfect petri dish of capitalism.” (For more information about sweatshops on the Mariana islands, see Sweatshop Watch’s Summer 2006 newsletter.)

The proposed wage increase now goes to the Senate, where it is expected to pass.

On January 23, 2007, Senators Dorgan (D-North Dakota), Graham (R-South Carolina), and Sanders (I-Vermont) introduced a tri-partisan measure which would prohibit the government from purchasing sweatshop goods. While S. 367 represents a significant step towards holding companies accountable for sweatshop violations, anti-sweatshop advocates would like to see stronger labor standards and enforcement mechanisms incorporated into the current bill. S. 367 has been referred to the Senate Committee on Finance.

A complete analysis of Congressional efforts to address sweatshops, free trade, and immigration will appear in the next issue of the Sweatshop Watch newsletter.
California’s Garment Workers Receive Owed Wages Through Garment Special Account

In a significant victory for garment workers who have been cheated out of their hard-earned wages, Sweatshop Watch successfully led efforts to ensure that garment workers receive just compensation through California’s Garment Special Account - without unnecessary, bureaucratic delays.

In Los Angeles, nearly 70% of garment factories fail to pay federal minimum wage and overtime - the most basic labor protection. As a result, garment workers in Los Angeles alone are owed nearly $81 million in unpaid wages each year. Workers who file successful wage claims with the Labor Commissioner often find that employers simply refuse to pay workers their wages - even when a court judgment is entered against the employer. For these workers, the state’s Garment Special Account is their last resort for recovering unpaid wages and overtime.

Starting in September 2005, Sweatshop Watch received reports that garment workers submitting valid claims were turned away from the Garment Special Account. Despite the fact that $1.6 million remained available in the account, the state budget effectively imposed a $200,000 cap on the total amount garment workers may recover in a single year - an amount which was exhausted only 2 1/2 months into the next fiscal year, before recovering owed wages. The delays posed a tremendous hardship for workers, who navigated a lengthy process to seek wages they had been unlawfully denied for months or even years. In addition, numerous workers were deterred from applying to the Garment Special Account altogether due to a misunderstanding that no more funding was available.

Thanks to Sweatshop Watch’s advocacy, the Legislature increased the annual appropriation for the Account from $200,000 to $500,000 and streamlined the process for releasing funds from the Account if workers’ claims should exceed $500,000 during the fiscal year. In June 2006, the State began processing existing claims and issuing checks to workers who had been waiting to recover their unpaid wages.

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of a minimum wage board. International organizations working in solidarity with Bangladeshi workers continue to pressure the local government and global garment industry to bring an end to these tragedies and to raise workers' minimum wage.

What You Can Do: Visit the Clean Clothes Campaign at www.cleanclothes.org for the latest updates and action alerts to support Bangladesh’s garment workers.

In El Salvador: Hermosa workers’ campaign far from over

In May 2005, the Hermosa factory in El Salvador closed without paying back wages and severance pay to 260 workers following workers’ attempts to organize a union. Since that time, a determined group of 63 workers have been campaigning to receive their owed wages and to end the blacklisting that prevents them from getting new jobs.

According to the Worker Rights Consortium, the key brands that sourced from Hermosa - Adidas, Nike, and Russell Athletic - were asked to contribute to a fund to pay the workers part of the $825,000 they are owed. Just days before Christmas 2006, the Fair Labor Association announced the creation of an “emergency fund” to assist workers. Reports from El Salvador indicate that $33,000 of the total $36,000 in the fund was distributed to 57 workers on December 29, 2006.

Although the emergency fund provides welcome relief to some workers, the amount is insufficient. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), workers are still owed substantial amounts of money, and none of the group of organized workers have been able to find new jobs. In a December 20 statement, former Hermosa workers said, “The amount, in our view, is miserable compared to the profits that the brands make based on the sacrifice of workers and on violations of human and labor rights. We accept the amount, but nevertheless our struggle will continue…”

What you can do: Send a letter to the brands that sourced from the Hermosa factory by visiting: http://www.cleanclothes.org/urgent/07-01-03.htm.

In India: Labor rights organizations silenced by court order

The Garment and Textile Workers’ Union (GATWU), Women Garment Workers Front (Munnade), Civil Initiatives for Development and Peace (CIVI DEP), the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), and the Clean Clothes Campaign Task Force in India remain under a court order that forces them to remain silent about alleged labor violations at Fibres and Fabrics International Pvt. Ltd. (FFI) and its subsidiary Jeans Knit Pvt. Ltd. (JKPL) in Bangalore, India.

The gag order, issued in July 2006 at the request of FFI/JKPL management, followed detailed reports by local organizations about alleged labor violations at FFI/JKPL, including harassment of workers, physical abuse, and non-payment of overtime wages. Workers have no way to voice their problems without fear of reprisals.

What You Can Do: Urge FFI/JKPL management and the brands sourcing from FFI/JKPL (G-Star, Armani, ReRe, Guess, Ann Taylor, Mexx and Gap) to remove the gag order and address worker allegations.

In the Philippines: Wal-Mart factory workers on strike

For several years, workers at Chong Won Fashion have endured unacceptable working conditions – 24-hour work shifts, no access to water and bathroom breaks during work hours, and very low wages, according to the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) in Washington, DC. Fed up by the lack of response from factory management to begin negotiations for a union contract, the United Workers of Chong Won in the Philippines declared a strike on September 25, 2006.

In recent months, reports from the Philippines indicate that workers’ attempts to organize have been met by repression and extreme violence at the hands of police and security guards. The most alarming news is the increasing number of murders involving those who support Filipino workers – including the recent death of Bishop Alberto Ramento, a steadfast advocate for workers’ rights and chair of the board of the Philippine Workers Assistance Center.

ILRF and the Maquila Solidarity Network call on Wal-Mart – as the primary buyer from the factory – to enforce its code of conduct and protect the human rights of workers at Chong Won. The Workers Assistance Center and United Workers of Chong Won request that letters be sent to the Filipino government as well.


In Thailand: Gina Form Bra factory workers reach a settlement

On November 17, 2006, the Gina Relations Workers Union (GRWU) reached a settlement with The Clover Group, owners of the Gina Form Bra Factory in Bangkok, Thailand. Gina workers have been fighting to keep their unionized factory open after receiving word in early September that the Clover Group was going to close the factory and shift orders to China or Cambodia. Major Clover Group clients include The Gap, The Limited (Victoria’s Secret), and Warnaco.

According to the Canada-based Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), The Clover Group agreed to pay all outstanding bonuses and legally required severance pay and approximately three-and-a-half months additional salary above the legal minimum severance pay for each worker. The package, worth approximately $1.6 million (US dollars), is an exceptional agreement in a country where even legal obligations are routinely ignored when factories close. It is the hope of the union that this settlement will set a positive precedent.

Although the union initially fought to keep the Gina Form Bra factory open, the factory closed on October 20, 2006. Even then, the unionized Gina workers did not give up. Despite the recent military coup in Thailand, which brought the country under Martial Law, Gina workers mounted regular protests to press for their
rights. These protests were supported by sustained international pressure on brands buying from Clover Group from solidarity networks in the US, Europe, Hong Kong, and Canada.

Thanks to these efforts, the workers have succeeded in winning a substantial severance package well above the norm in Thailand.

Sweatshop Watch would like to express our sincerest appreciation and gratitude to the following sister organizations for providing background information for this article and for supporting campaigns in solidarity with garment workers across the globe: Clean Clothes Campaign, International Labor Rights Fund, Maquila Solidarity Network, and Worker Rights Consortium.

Sweatshop Watch Update: Independent Monitor Hired to Enforce Los Angeles' SweatFree Law

Earlier this year, Sweatshop Watch and anti-sweatshop activists took a major step forward towards enforcing Los Angeles' landmark sweat-free ordinance when the City hired a non-profit, independent monitor. The monitor, the Worker Rights Consortium, will investigate working conditions in garment factories around the world that produce city uniforms. Significantly, this marks the first time that a monitor – funded by but fully independent from the City – will investigate sweatshop abuses at factories that produce city uniforms.

To date, over 160 cities, counties, and school districts plus six states have adopted “sweat-free” procurement laws, which ensure that uniforms and apparel purchased by public entities are made under sweat-free conditions. By leveraging the government’s purchasing power, these innovative policies ensure that taxpayer dollars support and sustain model factories – instead of subsidizing sweatshops.

In 2004, Sweatshop Watch, No More Sweatshops, Progressive Jewish Alliance, UNITE HERE, and scores of anti-sweatshop activists successfully urged the City of Los Angeles to pass one of the strongest sweat-free purchasing laws in the country. Since its passage, Sweatshop Watch has been spearheading efforts to vigorously enforce the law and pass similar laws across Los Angeles County – the nation’s hub of garment production. Last October, the Port of Los Angeles, one of the world’s largest trade gateways, adopted its own Sweat-Free Procurement resolution.

To join the Los Angeles Sweat-Free Coalition, please contact Sweatshop Watch at (213) 748-5945.

For more information about sweat-free campaigns in your area, visit the Sweat-Free Communities website at: www.sweatfree.org.
Fashion Victims: The true cost of cheap clothes at Primark, Asda, and Tesco
By War on Want (December 2006)
Based on extensive research as well as interviews with Bangladeshi garment workers, this report documents working conditions at garment factories in Bangladesh that produce clothes sold by bargain retailers in the UK, such as Primark, Asda, and Tesco. The findings reveal the true human cost of the goods sold so cheaply to consumers in the UK. The report can be downloaded from the Clean Clothes Campaign website at www.cleanclothes.org.

Mobilize the Immigrant Vote Toolkit
By Partnership for Immigrant Leadership and Action (August 2006)
For the first time, this 300-page Toolkit compiles in one place a collection of tools that PILA has developed to support immigrant community-based organizations in planning and implementing movement-building electoral strategies. This Toolkit is a must-have for organizations seeking to involve immigrants in upcoming elections, while strengthening your organizations and communities for the long haul. To order a copy, visit PILA’s website at www.pilaweb.org.

Rethinking the Effects of Immigration on Wages
By Immigration Policy Center (September 2006)
This publication examines the crucial question in the current immigration debate over what (if any) impact immigrants have on the wages of native-born workers. In reviewing new data and analysis from 1990-2004, the study finds that immigration has a positive effect on the wages of most native-born workers. Publications from The IPC are available on their website: www.immigrationpolicy.org.

Revealing Clothing: ETAG’s 2006 Transparency Report
By Ethical Trading Action Group (December 2006)
In December 2006, the Ethical Trading Action Group (ETAG) published its transparency ranking of 30 major apparel brands and retailers based on the information they provide to the public on their efforts to address labor rights in their global supply chains. Levi Strauss & Co. dropped from first to fifth place in the ETAG Report Card – behind Reebok, Mountain Equipment Co-op, Adidas, and Gap Inc. – after being suspended from the Ethical Trading Initiative for refusing to commit to a living wage for the thousands of workers worldwide who manufacture its products. For more information, visit www.maquilasolidarity.org.

A Second Attempt at Looking for Mickey Mouse’s Conscience: A Survey of the Working Conditions of Disney’s Supplier Factories in China
By Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (December 2006)
Based in Hong Kong, SACOM published this report as a follow up to their 2005 investigation of Disney’s labor practices in China. This report documents labor law violations at Disney’s supplier factories through SACOM’s investigation of three Disney factories located in Shenzhen and Zhuhai Cities in the Guangdong Province. For a copy of the report, visit www.sacom.hk.
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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