Tax Dollars Fund Sweatshops, New Study Says

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State and local governments pledge to end practice as momentum builds for ‘sweatfree’ purchasing

U.S. states, cities, and counties are inadvertently using millions of taxpayer dollars to purchase goods from companies engaged in serious human rights and labor violations, according to a first-of-its-kind report released today by SweatFree Communities. The study, *Subsidizing Sweatshops: How Our Tax Dollars Fund the Race to the Bottom, and What Cities and States Can Do*, includes in-depth case studies of 12 factories in nine countries that produce public employee uniforms for nine major uniform brands.

Elected officials, religious leaders, human rights groups, students and labor unions today participated in at least eight rallies, press conferences or other events around the country. “We are calling on public entities to join the Sweatfree Consortium, a collaborative effort of states, local governments, labor rights experts, and human rights advocates to end tax dollar support for sweatshops,” said Bjorn Claeson, Executive Director of SweatFree Communities and an author of the report. “We can use our collective purchasing power to improve working conditions instead of furthering the race to the bottom.”

“Governments have an obligation to conduct business in an open and ethical way,” Governor John E. Baldacci of Maine said today. “By working cooperatively with other states and localities, we can more effectively monitor supplier behavior and enforce standards for the way workers are treated in other countries.” Governor Baldacci is a leader in the campaign to end public purchasing from sweatshops.

The Sweatfree Consortium will help states, cities, counties, local government agencies, and school districts to enforce their commitments to end public purchasing from sweatshops by investigating factories and creating a market for change.

*Subsidizing Sweatshops* reveals widespread human rights and labor violations throughout the uniform industry, including: child labor; illegally low poverty wages; forced and unpaid overtime; verbal, physical, and sexual abuse; pregnancy testing, excessively long work hours...
causing physical ailments; disregard for freedom of speech or association; and elaborate schemes to deceive corporate auditors.

Workers at a Williamson-Dickie Manufacturing Co. (Dickies) supplier factory in Karachi, Pakistan, described to researchers the excessive working hours to which they are subjected: “12 to 13 hours a day, 30 days per month,” according to Fazad.

“If we refuse shifts, are absent, or make a mistake then our supervisors and other mid-level management beat and slap us,” said Bithi, a 22-year-old sewing operator who has worked four years at a Bangladesh factory producing undergarments for Bob Barker Co., a major supplier for U.S. state and county correctional institutions.

“In a globalized apparel industry where these violations are widespread,... gathering information about problems is an important first step in our effort to ensure full respect for the rights of the workers that our policies are designed to help,” wrote Betty Lamoreau, Director of Division of Purchases for the State of Maine, in letters to Cintas Corp., Blauer Manufacturing Co., and Bob Barker Co., three of the companies named in the report.

“We also expect you will take all appropriate steps to work with your suppliers to ensure that any labor rights and human rights violations are corrected and conditions for workers are improved,” wrote Wisconsin Secretary of Administration Michael L. Morgan in letters to Williamson-Dickie Manufacturing Co., Fechheimer Brothers Co., Blauer, and Bob Barker. The other companies named in the report are Lion Apparel, Propper International, Rocky Brands, and Eagle Industries.

Subsidizing Sweatshops recognizes the cities, states, counties, and school districts that have pursued sweatfree purchasing policies and are working proactively to establish the Sweatfree Consortium.

“If more people were informed about what conditions are like for the workers who make their clothes, I think that our situation would be different and there wouldn’t be as many violations in the factories,” said Elisa, a 31-year-old seamstress making uniforms at the Calypso Apparel factory in Nicaragua. “We hope that people in other countries will continue to support us and that we can all progress together.”

Subsidizing Sweatshops is available at: www.sweatfree.org/subsidizing

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SweatFree Communities coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries by working with both public and religious institutions to adopt sweatshop-free purchasing policies. Using institutional purchasing as a lever for worker justice, the sweatfree movement empowers ordinary people to create a just global economy through local action. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org
The State and Local Government Sweatfree Consortium will facilitate sweatfree purchasing policy enforcement by pooling resources, sharing knowledge and expertise, and coordinating standards and code compliance activities. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org/sweatfreeconsortium