

The Case for Sweatshops

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Candida Rosa Lopez, an employee in a Nicaraguan garment factory, works long hours over a sewing machine at less than a dollar an hour. Interviewed recently by a Miami Herald reporter, Ms. Lopez has a message for people in the United States and other wealthy countries who are nervous about buying goods from "sweatshops": "I wish more people would buy the clothes we make."

Contrary to what you have heard, sweatshops in third-world countries are a good deal for the people who work in them. Why? Because work, other than slave labor, is an exchange. A worker chooses a particular job because she thinks herself better off in that job than at her next-best alternative. Most of us would regard a low-paying job in Nicaragua or Honduras as a lousy job. But we're not being asked to take those jobs. Those jobs are the best options those workers have, or else they would quit and work elsewhere. You don't make someone better off by taking away the best of a bunch of bad choices.

Many workers in third-world sweatshops have left even harder, lower-paying jobs in agriculture to move to garment factories. Moreover, sweatshops are a normal step in economic development. Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, and Hong Kong all had sweatshop jobs thirty years ago. They don't now because workers in those countries have acquired skills and employers have accumulated capital. That's what will happen in Honduras, Nicaragua, and other poor countries—if we only let it.

What happens when people persuade companies not to hire children to work long hours? Oxfam, the British charity, reported that when factory owners in Bangladesh were pressured to fire child laborers, thousands of the children became prostitutes or starved.

Yet the National Labor Committee's executive director, Charles Kernaghan, goes around the country attacking sweatshops and trying to put legal barriers in the way of people buying from sweatshops. Robert Reich, former U.S. labor secretary under President Clinton, pressured Reebok International and Sears Roebuck to

get ShinWon, their South Korean subcontractor in Honduras, to lay off fifty teenage girls. He apparently did not ask, or care, what happened to them after they lost their jobs. Why are Kernaghan and Reich hurting the people they claim to care about? Simple. The people they really care about are unionized garment workers in the United States; the NLC is funded by U.S. unions. The garment workers lost on NAFTA and lost on GATT. This is their last-ditch effort to prevent foreign competition.

The next time you feel guilty for buying clothes made in a third-world sweatshop, remember this: you're helping the workers who made that clothing. The people who should feel guilty are those who argue against, or use legislation to prevent us, giving a boost up the economic ladder to members of the human race unlucky enough to have been born in a poor country. Someone who intentionally gets you fired is not your friend.