

CASE PRESENTATION

Stopping the Sweatshops

Nike, which controls over 40 percent of the international sporting goods industry, has been the target of human rights activists for over a decade. The public information campaign has sought to educate the American public about Nike's reliance on sweatshops in other countries which pay minimal wages and do not respect the most basic human rights in the workplace. Child labor, harassment in the workplace, and other inhumane working conditions have been cited. Nike has fought back by publicizing its efforts to improve the working conditions in those countries, even though they work mainly with contractors over which they say they have less control than in factories operated by Nike itself. Many other major manufacturers use contractors in impoverished countries in Asia, Central America, India, and elsewhere, but have not drawn the high-profile campaigns targeted at Nike.

Efforts in the U.S. Congress to clamp down on these sweatshop activities through trade agreements have had limited effect. In 2006, then-Congressman

(now Senator) Sherrod Brown of Ohio and Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota introduced the Decent Working Conditions and Fair Competition Act to end "sweatshop profiteering" by prohibiting the importation, the exportation, or the sale of goods made with prisoner sweatshop labor, child labor, and abusive guest worker systems. The Senators argued that in addition to the flagrant violations of human rights in those other countries tolerating these practices, "sweatshop imports are economic suicide for our country." By this they mean that workers in America, where working conditions are regulated to prohibit such abuses, cannot compete on price and lose their jobs. Critics of these proposals charge that American consumers benefit considerably by being able to import economic goods manufactured around the world, from sports shoes to electronic manufactured goods to clothing. The bill was reintroduced in Congress in 2007. Despite dozens of cosponsors, it has never been passed.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Do ordinary American consumers have any ethical obligation to take action to stop sweatshop working conditions in other countries? What actions can consumers take to stop these practices?
2. Do citizens of highly developed industrialized nations in North America and Europe have an ethical obligation to promote the human rights of citizens in less-developed countries?
3. Promoters of unregulated international trade often cite the good consequences for American consumers, especially much lower prices on goods that they might otherwise not be able to afford. Are these the only relevant consequences in the ethical equation? What other consequences seem
4. relevant? How do you balance them against low prices when you go shopping?
5. Have you ever participated in actions to stop sweatshops abroad, such as boycotting the purchase of certain products or writing letters to those manufacturers or participating in public demonstrations outside their headquarters? If so, what were your motivations in taking these steps? Do you feel you have made progress toward the goal of stopping those abusive labor practices around the world? What other steps might be taken?
6. How should we balance the push for decent working conditions for all workers around the world with the demand for economical goods that consumers want to buy?