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A Consensus Statement on Sweatshop Abuse

United Trauma Relief

This document focuses on an assumption made by those who object to antisweatshop actions: International sweatshops are currently an economic necessity that, given economic development, will cease to exist. Several arguments defending international sweatshops are examined and rebutted.

The term "sweatshop" refers to those factories relying on the exploitation and abuse of workers. Often (although not always) located in developing countries, these factories have been frequented by independent university researchers, who have published numerous accounts of worker imprisonment and physical abuse, as well

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as economic evidence revealing that many of these factories pay wages so small that their workers cannot live outside poverty. Several factories use horrific labor practices, and many factory workers have also been severely burned or mutilated in the workplace, while women among the labor population have often been forced to take birth control or abort their pregnancies (Given, 1997; Fernandez, 1997). The health burdens placed upon sweatshop workers have been extensively documented, and include exposure to noxious fumes, organophosphate compounds, and silica dust, resulting in record high cancer, asthma, bronchitis, pneumoconiosis, and leukemia rates in many regions because workers aren't provided with masks and gloves (Kim *et al.,* 2000).

These abuses are neither just nor irremediable, but many people believe that sweatshops are an economic necessity and will come to pass on their own with economic development. Closer examination of both the social and economic dimensions of sweatshop labor, however, reveals this presumption to be far from the truth.

Most objections to anti-sweatshop action stem from the idea that sweatshop jobs are the best opportunities available to people living in poor conditions. "They keep coming back day after day, so they must want these jobs." Trying to make the jobs better will simply mean that fewer jobs will be available, and people dependent on them will suffer. But those who have advanced this "economic" syllogism have ignored much of the evidence to the contrary. Although this idea may appear "intuitive," the reality surrounding the improvement of sweatshop conditions is quite contrary to intuition. Nevertheless, these "intuitive" arguments in support of sweatshops proliferate. Among them:

- "Any job is better than no job. These people would rather work in a sweatshop than starve."

Slavery might also be better than starvation, yet nobody advocates a return to slavery. Just because a bad job may be better than starvation doesn't justify labor abuses such as the beating and raping of workers or the threatening of worker's families—all abuses that have been regularly documented by independent researchers visiting sweatshop factories (Breslow, 1995; Foek, 1997). While accepting that a bad job might be better than nothing, we should continue to fight the abuse of human lives, and even a basic study of history reveals that most human progress as a society has occurred through such struggles for progress, not through maintenance of the status quo. If we justify abuse under the premise that it is better than the worst alternative, we create a slippery slope leading down to the complete devaluation of human life. As *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, a vocal critic of sweatshop abuse, writes, "What's next, employees who'll work for a bowl of gruel?" (Herbert, 1996).

- "If companies are forced to increase wages or improve conditions, they won't simply pay the same number of workers more. They will relocate to somewhere with fewer restrictions."

The idea that companies will "not like" the improvement of conditions is indeed correct. But, obviously, if corporations were allowed to do whatever they wanted, our world would go to hell. That's precisely the reason we have regulations to

mandate what is permissible and what isn't—it's the very reason we have seatbelts in our cars and arsenic limits for our water. The idea that corporations "won't simply pay" is ignorant of the basic idea of a corporate charter. Corporations, in becoming incorporated, are granted a charter by the state under the edict that they are responsible to the state, just like any citizen. The state sets a minimum wage, but one could say that corporations wouldn't "simply pay" that either. Because every corporation is ultimately required to be responsive to the state according to its charter, every corporation is required to pay a minimum wage anyway. Common sense and history argue against the idea that it would be best for corporations to act without any guidelines and have free reign over society. Therefore it's society's responsibility to determine what we allow and what we require of corporations, and corporations, because of the charter they have received, are just as responsible as regular citizens in having to follow law.

Can corporations afford to pay? The statistics speak for themselves: in 1965 the average CEO made 44 times the average factory worker; today, the average CEO makes 212 times the factory worker salary. Michael Eisner of Disney could pay every worker in his Haitian toy factories enough to feed and clothe themselves and their families annually if he would devote just 1% of his advertising budget to workers' salaries (Given, 1997).

As members of society, we should also ask ourselves: should corporations really be allowed to shop around the world for the most easily abused workforce, or should measures be put into place to prevent this abuse altogether? Indeed, such measures are starting to be put in place, and rather than engaging in a "race to the bottom"—a race for corporations to find the most abused workforce to manipulate—international response to the problem is calling for the construction of rules to put the rights of persons before the rights of exploiters (Cholewinski, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 1997; Rosen, Maurren, & Perez-Lopez, 1997). Such is the very nature of human progress through history, and only those who favor exploitation over human well-being are arguing that these rules should not be put into place.

- "Most companies that use sweatshops are actually just contracting through local producers, so they don't have a say in the conditions of factories."

This idea rests on a fundamental fallacy: that large multinational companies (e.g., NIKE, adidas, Jansport) contracting with local producers are helpless entities unable to have an effect on conditions in local factories. Modern evidence, however, disproves such a contention (Ross, 1997). Independent academics have learned that corporations often "squeeze their contractors into paying sub-minimum wages. Large retailers and retail chains pressure contract manufacturers by refusing to pay more than a rock-bottom price for manufacturing orders" (Given, 1997).

Public pressure, history shows, causes many multinationals to pressure local owners to improve working conditions in order to improve their reputations. As Iowa Senator Tom Harkin suggested, in rallying to produce a list of abusers and generate American consumer pressure against them, "Just as human rights organizations such as Amnesty International are able to document cases of human rights abuses and torture around the world, so can the identities of those industries and their host countries that are violating international labor standards . . . be identified" (Harkin,

1996). In fact, agencies have been created to monitor the conditions of such factories, and monitoring combined with public pressure can result in the improvement of such facilities. For example, reacting to public outrage in 1996, Liz Claiborne, NIKE, Phillips-Van Heusen, and L.L. Bean joined into an "Apparel Industry Partnership" to take steps to end sweatshop abuses (Salomon, 1996). Continued pressure will force the compliance of other companies as well.

- "Demands for a living wage will result in fewer workers as tasks will become automated. While those who remain employed will probably be better off, those who lose their jobs will not."

The cost of paying a fair, living wage in many countries is still far lower than the cost of automation. If automation did provide such an advantage, companies would have simply automated American plants, and reaped the many advantages of manufacturing close to home. Instead, they chose not to automate any further, and took advantage of lower wages and a more willing work force abroad. For the most part, the clothing industry is about as automated as is effective, and further automation is not very likely to occur. As a result, paying a living wage is highly unlikely to result in the "economic elite" scenario presented above. As evidenced by interviews with sweatshop workers, laborers are not seeking U.S. or European-level wages; workers in poorer countries want decent workplaces, ones in which they are not constantly threatened by torture or death (Mort, 1996).

- "You are trying to restrict global free trade. This type of trade is the only way to raise people out of poverty, and cause economies to develop. Once economies do develop, sweatshops will cease to exist. In a developed economy, companies will stop abusing their workers and will treat them well."

Those opposed to sweatshops are not trying to prevent trade, but are trying to prevent the abuse that has been justified under the premise of global trade. Protection for workers, and indeed respect for human rights, has never been mutually exclusive with trade (Richburg & Swardson, 1996). Companies should not be permitted to benefit by violating the rights of human beings, and "free trade" has never implied the blacklisting and killing of workers by death squads in Central America, the prevention of union building in Mexico, or the raping and beating of women in Sri Lanka (Human Rights Watch/Asia, 1995). As *New York Times* columnist Karl Meyer wrote, "We can no longer believe that anything goes in the global marketplace, regardless of social consequences. It is precisely this conviction that underlies efforts to attach human rights conditions to trading relations—to temper the amorality of the market" (Meyer, 1997).

Indeed, evidence against the idea that development necessarily results in improved conditions is abundant in American history. Not only do sweatshops continue to exist (mostly in Los Angeles and New York), but even places of employment that are not considered sweatshops are often far from optimal (Lee & Mitchell, 1998). Many employers, including even Harvard University, still fail to pay a living wage. Workers will continue to be exploited on a global scale until adequate protections are put into place through public pressure. Public pressure resulted in the improvement of sweatshop labor conditions within the American northeast after the

industrial revolution; those sweatshops of the late 19th and early 20th centuries virtually disappeared after World War II because of increased public pressure (through programs like the National Consumers League's "White Label" inspections) resulting in government regulation of monopolies and the rise of trade unions (Golodner, 1997). Public pressure is the only insurance that conditions will improve elsewhere. Conditions do not simply improve as a result of economic growth. In El Salvador, for example, 50,000 new sweatshop jobs have been created in the last 10 years, with the country's exports jumping 4,000 percent. But real wages have been halved. "Its women can't afford to buy the clothes they make," says Neil Kearney, president of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Union. "And people who protest are subject to rape and murder" (Clark, 1996).

As Lance Compa, an international labor law professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, recently wrote in *The Washington Post:* "After wealth has been created, respecting workers' rights and paying them fairly is still a choice, one that doesn't always depend on economics. Instead, choosing justice for workers is driven by organizing, bargaining and political action, increasingly on an international scale. . . . With a human rights dimension, more trade and investment are a potential source of great good for working people. Genuine comparative advantage for lower-wage countries is something the international community can accept, if it helps poorer nations develop, if wages and conditions can rise and if workers have a voice in society. But artificial advantage based on human rights violations is something else that the international community should stop" (Compa, 2001).

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