

Editorial: How We Can Fight Sweatshops

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The Clinton Administration, from Bill Clinton on down, likes to talk about how it is dedicated to fighting sweatshops. However, the way the White House has chosen to go about it actually perpetuates sweatshops.

Why? Because the White House sees those who are the real problem, the retailers, as the bearers of the solution to the sweatshop problem. According to the White House and its enforcer, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the best way to fight sweatshops is through the DOL's No Sweats initiative that calls for voluntary codes of conduct agreed to by retailers and manufacturers.

In Bill Clinton's view, big retailers and manufacturers are innocent bystanders who are ignorant of how their garments are made by unscrupulous contractors and sub-contractors. In fact, retailers and manufacturers are the ones who set brutal standards of competition in the garment industry! Their power comes from the fact that it is the retailer who determines the amount of money to be spent producing a garment. If a contractor or manufacturer cannot meet that price (maximum labor at minimum costs) the retailers will just choose another company to do business with. As there are only a handful of retailers compared to contractors in the U.S., contractors feel they have little choice but to squeeze their workforce for more labor at lower costs. The result is brutal and illegal conditions. Clinton's solution -- calling for monitoring of factories and disclosure of subcontractors' locations -- diverts attention away from the root of the problem: the profit drive of retailers and large manufacturers.

Instead, we have to target the kingpins of the sweatshop system: retailers and manufacturers. In the DKNY campaign, for example (see "Women Workers Take on DKNY"), the workers realized that DKNY, who has a contract with UNITE, was the main problem, not the factory owner. In contrast, the union and the DOL, following White House strategy, saw the contractors as the main problem leaving DKNY off the hook. In doing so, they ensure the sweatshop conditions would just move into another factory while the other one closes. The result was that DKNY closed the factory, put its work into another sweatshop while the workers were left on the street and DKNY let off the hook. The workers realized that to win real change, the main targets must be those at the top of the pyramid. Any strategy that avoids holding retailers and large manufacturers accountable is bound to fail. Through the "Ain't I a Woman?!" Campaign, the DKNY workers are reaching out to other workers, especially women, to hold DKNY and other bosses accountable. Unlike a contractor, a major company like DKNY can't hide and move away. Thus, a victory against DKNY benefits workers at all DKNY factories and inspires workers in other areas to follow suit.

By organizing working people to take on sweatshop kingpins, we are providing an example for people of all trades and backgrounds, in our cities, right here and across the world.