

Sewing for millionaires

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Sewing for Millionaires A two-hour drive from the capital of San Jose, Costa Rica, sits the small community of Turrialba where mostly young workers sit and sew baseballs destined for Major League Baseball teams. Rawlings Sporting Goods Company moved its baseball manufacturing operations from Haiti in 1986 when the political landscape of the country began to change. Rawlings selected the town of Turrialba due to the incentives offered to the company by the Costa Rican government. Rawlings was awarded a free-trade zone in which the company would be allowed to operate duty-free in the country.

Rawlings pays no import tariffs on the goods it imports to manufacture its baseballs, and the finished product can be shipped duty-free into the United States under the Caribbean Basin Initiative. The Turrialba region was hard hit economically in the 1980s when a major highway from the capital bypassed the town. Because travelers no longer stopped in Turrialba, the Costa Rican government wanted to develop the local area through foreign investment. Rawlings found the potential workforce better educated, and more disciplined than its workers in Haiti. The country was also well known for being very politically stable.

With few employment opportunities in the area, Rawlings had no difficulty in securing dedicated and motivated employees. Although Costa Rica is the wealthiest country in Central America, per capita income is still only about \$4, 200 a year. Costa Rica has a national unemployment rate of 6. 7 percent. However, the rate can vary from region to region. With the completion of the new highway and declining employment opportunities in the coffee and sugarcane industries, many local residents of Turrialba were eager to find

stable employment. Most Rawlings employees in Costa Rica are engaged in sewing operations.

In the plant, 300 employees sit in rows of high back chairs and sew baseballs. Many employees break the boredom of the work by listening to music on their headphones. The plant employs a total of 575 workers. At one time Rawlings employed approximately 1, 900 workers at the Costa Rican plant, however, employment fell when the company shifted production of its lower quality baseballs to China. The Rawlings plant takes a baseball core and wraps it in yarn. The product is then covered with cowhide and sewn by hand. Baseballs must be sewn by hand in order to achieve the quality level demanded by the Major Leagues.

Each worker sews 108 perfect stitches using a long needle and thread. The balls are then inspected, cleaned, and stamped with the MLB logo and the signature of the commissioner of baseball. The balls are then packed and shipped to the port city of Limon where they are loaded onto a ship bound for Port Everglades, Florida. The baseballs are then trucked to Rawlings' Springfield, Missouri facility, and then to Major League teams or retail stores. Rawlings has been the exclusive supplier of baseballs to the Major Leagues since 1977. The Costa Rican facility produces approximately 2. million baseballs a year, with 1. 8 million of those going to Major League Baseball. The remaining balls are sold to minor league and college baseball teams, or sold to the public through retail stores or the Websites of MLB and Rawlings. Although Rawlings refuses to disclose the price of the baseballs paid by MLB, the baseballs retail on the company's Website for \$12. 99 per unit. Employees are paid \$1. 21 per hour and receive the value of 67 cents an

hour in benefits, or about 30 cents per ball produced. Workers can go home early in the week if they complete their production quotas.

Rawlings workers earn about 14 percent above the Costa Rican minimum wage. In addition to their wages, Rawlings employees in Costa Rica must be paid for eleven holidays, receive two weeks of paid vacation a year, and receive a Christmas bonus equal to one month's pay. The Company must also pay into a retirement and medical plan and provide four months of maternity leave when needed. A 2004 New York Times article questioned the pay and working conditions of the Rawlings plant in Costa Rica. The article accused Rawlings and MLB of running a sweatshop in Costa Rica where workers were underpaid and worked in an unhealthy environment.

Consumer advocate Ralph Nader joined in the criticism by writing a letter to Bud Selig, MLB Commissioner and the Executive Director of the MLB Player Association. In the letter Nader condemned the two men for allowing baseballs to be manufactured in what he considered to be poor conditions. Portions of the letter follow: " Your respective organizations must not ignore their roles in this exploitation and abuse of worker rights committed under Major League Baseball and Player Association product sourcing and licensing agreements. " " American consumers and baseball fans currently have no guarantee that any icensed Major League Baseball products are not being made under sweatshop conditions that violate basic human and worker rights standards. " Major League Baseball consumer products vice president, Howard Smith, responded to the rising complaints by stating: " I can assure you that there is no company we do business with that knowingly goes into a factory with sub-par working conditions. " Not everyone agrees with Mr.

Smith. Maribel Alezondo Brenes worked at the Rawlings plant for seven years before her doctor told her to stop working there for health reasons.

Carpal tunnel syndrome has been noticed in the Rawlings employees due to the repetitive nature of the work. Dr. Carlos Guerrero who worked at the Rawlings plant as company physician says that up to 90 percent of Rawlings employees may have experienced pain from the work, from minor cuts to disabling injuries. Others feel that the plant has been a good addition to the region, including Warny Gomez, who worked at the Rawlings facility for four years and made enough money to attend college and to become a teacher.

With average pay for Major League Baseball players close to \$2. 3 million a year, some Rawlings employees feel that their compensation is unjust. Many, however, feel like Alan Cascante, an eight-year employee of the baseball factory: “ We can live on that (Rawlings wages). We never made that working in the fields. ” Plant manager, Ken West agrees with Cascante, by saying “ The best thing’s the pay. We’re a good place to work. ” The debate over pay and working conditions of employees who supply MLB with its products appears to be growing in some quarters.

People like Kenneth Miller; a self-appointed champion of sweatshop workers takes his message to the fans by camping outside ballparks. He tells potential consumers of MLB products that the baseball player bobble head doll they are about to purchase was made by a Chinese worker who works 20 hour shifts for very little pay. Miller states that he often finds indifference among consumers. Some tell him: “ Why are you trying to interrupt our nice day at the ballpark? Miller and a handful of others are pressuring MLB to take greater control over the working conditions of its suppliers, such as Rawlings.

As the debate continues in the United States over the working conditions and pay of the Costa Rican employees and others, baseballs are sewn in Turrialba with pictures of Alex Rodriguez, Mike Piazza, and other baseball players hanging on the walls of the factory. Rawlings' employees, however, are too busy sewing baseballs for the millionaire players to even notice the pictures hanging above them.