

First world consumerist role in third world sweatshops



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First World consumerism plays a role in the persistence of Third World sweatshops, yet there are conflicting thoughts on how the issue of sweatshops should be addressed. This paper examines sweatshops and perspectives surrounding the potential rectification of the issue, on what end this correction should be addressed, the consumerism aspect or in the sweatshops themselves. The Clean Clothes Campaign's (CCC, a movement to improve sweatshop conditions) processes and outcomes, private monitoring, and the roles and structures within sweatshops will support my argument proving that for sweatshops to be improved or removed, action must be taken within the Third World countries themselves. My topic of Third World sweatshops and First World consumerism is relative to globalization and "just in time" production because they create a large demand for the inexpensive and fast labour that sweatshops offer. There has been a recent "clean clothes" movement in which consumers have begun to boycott stores that sell apparel produced in sweatshops. This method of protesting sweatshops is not beneficial and the alleviation of sweatshops in Third World countries requires the cooperation of the workers and an intervening power. Jill Esbenshade's *Monitoring Sweatshops* addresses the roles of both workers and consumers within the global apparel industry. Esbenshade covers a broad range of aspects which influence sweatshops such as private monitoring of sweat shops, and interests of manufacturers, contractors, and workers. Private monitoring as a system is not successful in its attempts to improve sweatshop conditions because it does not prioritize the needs of workers, instead it prioritizes the needs of the manufacturers (Esbenshade 2004: 89). Cheap and fast labour benefits manufacturers because it is an

inexpensive way of supplying the "just in time" production system, putting fair treatment of workers in the back of their minds. Within sweatshops the interests of manufacturers and workers conflict, and those of the manufacturers prevail. Monitors have little training and are not trustworthy investigators as they have a history of being swayed by manufacturers to postpone assessments as it becomes close to crunch time. They clean up sweatshops but only to the extent that prices do not have to be raised. Monitors do not institute changes or upgrades that will cost high prices or that will set back the factory in production time. The cooperation of monitoring firms is beneficial to the manufacturers because they pay the monitor's wages (Esbenshade 2004: 97-98). As explained in Esbenshade's *Monitoring Sweatshops*, the monitoring system is one with many holes, "Who is paying the [monitoring firm's] wages? The manufacturer is, and they ask them to turn their head when it is crunch time and they need to get production out" (Esbenshade 2004: 98).

There are global movements to end sweatshops existing currently such as trade unions and NGOs, informal economy, the CCC's method of urgent appeals, and consumers roles in fair trade products and clean clothes. The CCC's use of urgent appeals and its manner of intervention is only beneficial for a handful of the sweatshops it enters, more often than not it results in factory closures, leaving people unemployed (Sluiter 2009: 185). Urgent appeals do have benefits, they "are a good way to start a dialogue with companies, because they are about specific cases; companies cannot hide behind general answers" but they are seldom cost-effective and also often end in factory closures (Sluiter 2009: 185). Many Third World populations are

reliant on sweatshops because they provide mass employment and keep the economy afloat. As hard as First World populations may fight for the removal of sweatshops in the Third World, they are greatly needed because the jobs that they provide prevent laborers from starving, working as prostitutes, and begging on the streets (Rothstein 2005: 41). The informal economy that has developed has made the intervention of an outside force necessary. Steady jobs have been replaced by informal means of employment, giving workers the short end of the stick and no leg to stand on if their employment is being terminated (Sluiter 2009: 187). In the globalized sweatshop industry the workers are at the mercy of the manufacturers which proves that the CCC's methods are not useful because whether the sweatshop exists or not, manufactures will develop a new industry that is inexpensive and still exploits workers. The laws relating to working conditions and employment security must be altered and more strongly enforced rather than removing factory employment in the Third World all together. When an apparel company requires production, it offers a price to the manufacturers and then prices are cut and conditions are altered until the product is able to be produced for the price offered. Seeing as the main cost being paid by the manufacturers is wages, the goal can be reached by cutting labour costs (Esbenshade 2008: 456). Working in an informal economy is usually the only option for workers in sweatshops. No employment contracts are composed so workers can earn below the legal minimum wage, are not paid on time, are expected to work beyond regular hours, and do not receive benefits of any kind (Sluiter 2009: 188). If a contract is written, it often exploits the worker and do not make exception for pregnancy or illness, and if a worker were to get sick their employment would be threatened as it would be seen <https://assignbuster.com/first-world-consumerist-role-in-third-world-sweatshops/>

as a violation of the contract. Gender based discrimination often occurs because a female employee is seen as a risky hire for several reasons. "Gender-based discrimination is a tool for labour-market flexibility" Sluiter explains, the long hours and low pay make it difficult for women to keep their family fed (Sluiter 2009: 191).

If any action should be taken to correct the use of sweatshops and the treatment of workers it should be to remove sweatshops from Third World countries and instate new businesses and a new way of involvement in the global market. Merely improving sweatshop conditions could be extremely detrimental to the over all economy of the country, but removing the businesses entirely without instituting a solution, could be as equally destructive. First World activists fight for wage increases in sweatshops, through the CCC for example, but victories on the Western front " may turn into defeats when wage raises have been won in factories that subsequently shut down" (Sluiter 2009: 184). Rothstein argues that First World intervention in sweatshops is not as beneficial as it is though to be, by stating, " If Western activists succeed in forcing firms to raise wages, limit hours, or reject children as laborers production would cease and be replaced in the global marketplace by those not bound by Western standards" (Rothstein 2005: 41). Although I do not agree that these sweatshops are a necessity in Third World countries, implementing improvements is the wrong way to go about correcting the abuses. Through corrections production will be reduced, yet if sweatshops are removed and a new system is brought about, a less corrupt means of production could grow and there could be a possibility of self sustainability. While mass boycotting of corporate giants

that supply sweatshop produced apparel may be a powerful means of motivating manufacturers to pull production out of Third World countries, the outcome would be harmful because little would be left for them to participate in the global economy.

It is a known fact that if the price of a commodity rises, the demand for it will fall. Therefore, if wages in sweatshops were increased, product prices would rise, consumption would diminish, and manufacturers would move elsewhere in search of cheap labour. Thus leaving a population unemployed and unable to participate in the growing globalization of the economic market. A large problem to do with instituting improvements to sweatshop conditions is that every change in the industry could have ripple effects on important aspects of the global trade economy as well as the economy and well being that effects workers in the Third World. For example, if children were to be banned from working in sweatshops families would not have enough money would become impoverished (Rothstein 2005: 41). The seemingly improved conditions would spark many contradictions.

Richard Rothstein argues in his piece "Defending Sweatshops: Too Much Logic, Too Little Evidence" that First World activists are ignorant of the perspectives and needs of Third World habitants. Sweatshop employment ensures the highest wage earnings in many underdeveloped and developing countries. Rothstein recalls a story of an Indonesian woman, Tratiwoon, who sells items found in the garbage for a dollar a day with her three year old son (Rothstein 2005: 41). Tratiwoon dreams of the day that her son is older and can get a job at the nearest sweatshop, because to these people "a sweatshop represents a leap in living standards" (Rothstein 2005: 41).
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Rothstein also argues that " Americans ... get on their high horses about child labour" but do not understand the context in which it is used and needed in the Third World (Rothstein 2005: 41). Child Labour Hawks remove children from sweatshop employment without comprehending the repercussions. " Saving" a young person from child labour may result in impoverishing an entire family or subjecting them to homelessness or starvation. Perhaps First World activism aiming to end sweatshops its fueled by guilt, " woman and children are working at slave wages for our benefit- and this makes us feel unclean'" (Rothstein 2005: 42). In reality, while First World consumers do experience benefit from sweatshop production, Third World laborers are dependent on sweatshop employment to maintain their quality of life. Sweatshops in underdeveloped countries are not looked upon negatively, jobs in these factories are admired and desired.

The Neoliberal theories of privatization and deregulation have enforced the proliferation of the sweatshop and garment industry in the Third World. This occurs through a combination of weakening enforcement of labour laws and creating a dependency on export oriented employment as privatization limits job availability (Esbenshade 2008: 457). Workers needs are being overlooked in order for countries to do business, " countries are literally competing for apparel contracts based on who has the more docile and lower paid workforce" (Esbenshade 2008: 457). Employers minimize workers needs because manufacturers locate with non-unionized businesses and unorganized plans. In the time of globalization labour has been divided among class, gender, race, and nations, the growing diversity makes it difficult for workers to feel comfortable and identify with their co-workers

(Esbenshade 2008: 458). Keeping workers isolated increases production and attachment,

Workers are not brought together in ever-larger worksites where their common experience unites them. Instead they are separated into thousands of small shops isolated from one another by distance and anonymity, and often by borders and language as well (Esbenshade 2008: 458).

It is unclear to sweatshop labourers who their enemy is, there are many exploiters both large and small and workers cannot rely on their bosses to protect them from this exploitation, as their bosses are at the mercy of far away corporations (Esbenshade 2008: 458).

Esbenshade's "Going Up Against the Global Economy: New Developments in the Anti-Sweatshops Movement" discusses "United Students Against Sweatshops" (USAS), a student run anti-sweatshop campaign that directs schools to do businesses with corporations that treat their employees with respect. USAS went through several phases of initiating their cause in universities, firstly forcing schools to begin only using businesses that disclose their name and location, secondly activists requested that universities adopt "independent monitoring codes by joining the WRC" (Workers Rights Consortium) (Esbenshade 2008: 459). The third phase is currently underway, students are pressuring universities to join the Designated Supplier Program which requires that manufacturers have special licenses to use factory facilities (Esbenshade 2008: 459). The aim of the USAS is to hold the manufacturers responsible for the conditions of their workers, and factories where worker's rights are not being respected may be <https://assignbuster.com/first-world-consumerist-role-in-third-world-sweatshops/>

revealed (Esbenshade 2008: 459). The USAS is better than other anti-sweatshop organizations, rather than fighting for higher wages and better working conditions it selects only the better manufacturers to do business with. This may motivate manufactures of low standard factories to correct their ways in order to be hired by universities.

Neoliberal policies have destabilized government protection of workers in developing countries, mainly introduced by the mandates put forward by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Esbenshade 2008: 457).

Governments that have become in debt have increased amounts of sweatshops and have weakened labour laws in order to expand their export commodities (Esbenshade 2008: 457). The work environment in sweatshops has become unstructured by means of enforcing labour laws, and while monitoring is taking place it is privatized, creating a relaxed relationship between the manufacturers (who pay the monitors wages) and the monitors. Monitoring is untrustworthy because working conditions are in the hands of the private sector who police themselves (Frank 2008: 35). T. A. Frank expresses his experiences as a private monitor in "Confessions of a Sweatshop Inspector" proving that inspections were not thorough or trustworthy "the auditors who followed me found pregnant employees hiding on the roof and Burmese import workers earning criminally low wages. Whoops." (Frank 2008: 35). If a monitor can miss things such as these, it can be believed that the privatized monitoring sector is untrustworthy and not accomplishing what it claims to be its goal. Winston describes how the well-being of sweatshop employees is in the back of the manufacturer's minds. After finding all sorts of violations in a Chinese

sweatshop, the owner went on to explain that the exploitation of workers is necessary to fulfill consumer and economic demand. She stated, " But really, it's all about profit. If I paid my workers more money, I'd have to raise the price to my buyers, the people who are sending you here to inspect my factory. Do you think they would accept that?" (Winston 2005: 1124-1128).

The current system of private monitoring is corrupted, and the CCC's use of urgent appeals are less than productive. It is clear that merely aiming to improve conditions have ripple effects on many other aspects of the globalized economy, and that raising wages or banning child labour in sweatshops would be detrimental to the country at stake. Currently, an organization that is moving in the right direction with it's aim toward correcting sweatshops is the USAS, who only uses licensed manufacturers who recognize worker's rights. The USAS's methods may motivate manufacturers to clean up their factories to receive business deals from First World universities. Undoubtedly the use of sweatshops needs to be corrected, and the method of going about this is to alleviate countries of sweatshops and introduce a new means of economic involvement and a new enforcement plan.