



USA

Teens in Sweatshop

Who made the clothes you're wearing? Was it someone your age?

By Victor Landau

“Rats were running all over the place. It was impossible not to step on them,” Erica C. remembers. When she complained, she says, her boss told her to “shut up, get back to work, or quit.”

In 2000, Erica, then 18 and an illegal immigrant from Mexico, had few options. So she stayed at her job as a seamstress. Erica worked in a **garment** (clothing) factory in Los Angeles, California, that supplied shirts to Forever 21, a teen-fashion company.

Earning \$250 dollars, or less, for a 50-hour workweek meant that survival was a struggle.

“I’d work 12 hours a day without any break,” Erica told *JS*. “The bathrooms were disgusting and full of cockroaches. But I had to work. I needed money for rent, for food.”

Erica was later fired from her job after working 60-hour weeks during the Christmas shopping season. She says she was dismissed for complaining that she did not receive her overtime pay.

What Is a Sweatshop?

U.S. laws protect worker safety and guarantee minimum hourly wages (currently set at \$5.15 an hour for most U.S. jobs). Still, many businesses operate “sweatshops” to increase company profits at laborers’ expense.

“A sweatshop is any business that uses child labor, pays **substandard** [below minimum] wages, or creates an unsafe workplace,” says Darlene Atkins of the National Consumers League, a nonprofit **advocacy** (support) group. “It involves a lot of differ-

ent products, not just clothing. There are sweatshops for shoes, toys, jewelry, sporting goods, fruits and vegetables, and just about any kind of product.”

Today, most U.S. sweatshops employ adults and illegal immigrants. The increased **scrutiny** (attention) from U.S. authorities has deterred sweatshop owners from hiring child laborers. According to Atkins, young workers are used mostly in sweatshops in Asia and South America.

“Many of the countries in those areas do have child labor laws. But there’s not a lot of political will to enforce them,” says Atkins.

In recent years, several well-known clothing brands, including the Gap, have been accused either of operating or profiting from sweatshops in the U.S. and overseas.

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Teens in Sweatshops

"No factory is perfect," admits Dan Henkle, a Gap Inc. executive.

In response to charges that the Gap profits from sweatshop labor, the company designed a "Code of Vendor Conduct" to ensure workers' rights. Should a manufacturer fail to comply with these principles over time, Henkle told *JS*, the Gap will cease to do business with that factory.

"People Are Afraid"
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Jeanne Zhuo's family immigrated to New York City from China in the 1980s. At age 13, she began to work at the same garment sweatshop as her mom, aunt, and other relatives.

"It was very crowded," Jeanne says. "In the summer, there was no [air conditioning]. A lot of machines gave off heat, [and] the windows were always closed. It got so hot, it was hard to breathe."

Today, Jeanne works as an inves-

tigator for the New York State Department of Labor. She inspects garment factories throughout New York City.

"I know how bad life can be [in a sweatshop]," she says. "People are afraid to speak up, to stand up for their rights."

According to the department, about 50 percent of the city's 4,000 garment factories **violate** (break) the minimum-wage laws. Last year, the department recovered more than \$3 million in back wages for sweatshop workers.

The Struggle Continues

Today, Erica C. is 21 and continues to work as a seamstress, but for another company. She likes her new job and says that she is paid fairly. In 2002, Erica won part of a legal settlement from Forever 21.

But many other sweatshop workers are not as fortunate. In 2000, Antonio M. worked in a

garden-hose factory in Brooklyn, New York. An illegal immigrant, Antonio, 42, was earning about \$300 dollars a week for 50 hours of work.

One night, he went to the hospital with a bloody nose. Doctors told him that exposure to the factory's toxic chemicals had damaged his kidneys.

"No one ever warned me about the chemicals," says Antonio. "A friend I worked with is now dead [from the exposure]. Another is dying in a hospital. I need a new set of kidneys or the same will happen to me."

Make the Road by Walking, an advocacy group in New York City, has filed a lawsuit on behalf of Antonio. Any financial award or settlement he receives will go toward his urgently needed transplant.

"This is injustice," says Antonio. "What happened to me shouldn't happen to anyone. They didn't pay me much when I worked there [at the factory]. And now, I'm the one who's paying." *JS*



Workers sew at a *maquila*, or sweatshop, in Guatemala City, Guatemala.

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Your Turn

WORD MATCH

- | | |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1. garment | A. support |
| 2. substandard | B. attention |
| 3. advocacy | C. break |
| 4. scrutiny | D. below minimum |
| 5. violate | E. clothing |

THINK ABOUT IT

Were the clothes, games, or sports equipment you brought recently made in a sweatshop? How could you find out?

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