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Made in the U.S.A.

by Helen Zia

Too many of the clothes made in the United States are produced by women working endless hours for a pittance in sweatshops. A Ms. reporter went undercover for the first hand report on the whole dirty business.

This is not the usual shopping tour of fashionable San Francisco. The small band of women dodge cable cars in the city's tony Union Square district, home to chic designer boutiques. They proceed along the bustling sidewalks with their handheld bullhorn, exhorting shoppers to boycott high-end, high-frill dresses made by Jessica McClintock, a designer who, until recently, maintained her flagship store in the area. "Jessica McClintock says 'Let them eat lace,'" proclaim their flyers, which

move like hot sale items. Near Macy's, a crowd of high school students gather around. "I just bought one of her dresses," laments a teenager. "You'll just have to return it," says her friend.

The demonstrators are activists from Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates (AIWA). McClintock first came to AIWA's attention when a manufacturer of her clothing owed US\$15,000 in back wages to 12 seamstresses. The workers turned to AIWA, which came up with something unusual in the garment industry: a highly visible consumer campaign directed not at the contracted manufacturer, but at a company that had hired it to make the clothes. Of all the

companies AIWA looked into, Jessica McClintock had the best-known label.

As a point of fact, McClintock had paid for the dresses and had no legal responsibility for a contractor's failings—a point that AIWA readily concedes. But in an industry rife with labor abuses, AIWA reasoned, the responsibility for violations against garment workers goes beyond that of the direct employer. "Jessica McClintock is one of many clothing manufacturers who abdicate responsibility for their workers' health, safety, and just compensation," says Young Shin, executive director of AIWA. "Their sweat and blood made her US\$145 million in gross sales.

She must be accountable to the women who make her clothes.”

It's hard to imagine a parent who wants the cute outfits she buys for her child to be made by exhausted women with children of their own whom they rarely see because they're putting in 16-hour days. Despite a campaign to “Buy American,” most consumers don't realize that much of the clothing bearing the proud label “Made in the U.S.A.” has been produced by women who work for pennies a garment in conditions that rival turn-of-the-century sweatshops. The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) defines a sweatshop as a business that regularly violates wage, child labor, health and/or safety laws. The clothing brands found in sweatshops include some of the U.S.'s best known labels: Esprit, The Gap, J.C. Penney, The Limited, Liz Claiborne, Patagonia, Ralph Lauren, and Wal-Mart.

The garment industry is like a pyramid, with retailers—department stores like Bloomingdale's, Macy's, Sears, and others—at the top. They buy their fashions from companies like Liz Claiborne and Guess?, who are known as manufacturers although they rarely make their own clothes. The majority farm out their work to thousands of factory owners—the contractors whose factories are often sweatshops. Contractors are the small fry in the pyramid; they are often undercapitalized entrepreneurs who may be former garment workers themselves, taking in a small profit per garment.

At the bottom of the pyramid is the worker, generally a woman—and sometimes her child—who is paid US\$0.50 or US\$1 for a dress that costs US\$120 at retail. As a general rule, prices within the pyramid follow a doubling effect at each tier. The contractors double their labor costs and overhead when quoting a price to the garment companies, which, in turn,

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calculate their overhead and double that to arrive at a price to charge the retailer. The retailer then doubles this price, and sometimes adds still more, to assure a profit even after two or three markdowns.

Faced with continuous market pressures for lower prices, retailers maintain their profits by demanding still lower prices from manufacturers who, in turn, force the contractors to take less money. The contractors squeeze the workers by paying them as little as possible and reducing standards for working conditions. This practice of squeezing labor is known as “sweating”—which is where “sweatshop” comes from.

According to a 1994 GAO report, the number of U.S. sweatshops is increasing. A year earlier, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) reported that the number of sweatshop workers had increased dramatically during the previous 15 years—by more than a third in California alone. The increase in sweatshop labor has occurred as overall employment in the garment-industry has fallen dramatically.

Los Angeles and New York City are the largest apparel centers and home to the most sweatshops. San Francisco, Mi-

ami, New Jersey and Texas are not far behind. Most sweatshops are hidden away where inspectors never find them, but about 22,000 contract shops around the country do business openly, sewing clothing for approximately 1,000 manufacturers. Even among these seemingly legal shops, many operate in near-sweatshop conditions. A 1994 study of Los Angeles garment factories found that 90 percent of them were not in compliance with labor laws. Working in these contract shops are some 800,000 employees; about 650,000 are women. Latina and Asian immigrants, both documented and undocumented, are thought to be the

most heavily represented in the shops.

The sweatshop is just off one of the busiest streets in New York City's borough of Queens, near Shea Stadium and the tennis courts of the U.S. Open. To enter, you walk across a trash-strewn parking lot into a gray building, up two flights of cement stairs, down a cold, dimly lit hall to a double set of heavy steel doors and chain-link gates.

Beyond piles of pastel clothes in various stages of completion are two long rows of women, each hunched over a droning sewing machine. They have the dazed look of people who have been performing the same task far too long. It's Saturday night, and most of them have been working since morning.

Rising above the piles of clothes are tangled wires that power the sewing machines and steam presses. A single spark could turn the whole place, crammed with flammable fabric and lint, into a blazing inferno. No one seems concerned; in one section of the crowded room a few workers sit under the “No Smoking” sign, cutting loose cthreads and puffing away on cigarettes. The only open window

in the hot, stuffy room is by the huge steam press that fuses interfaciings to fabric.

From out of the stacks of clothes, a smiling, gap-toothed woman appears. Bibi, perspiring and disheveled, steps gingerly over the ladies' blouses she has neatly folded and stuffed into plastic bags, now strewn in slippery piles on the floor. She is 56, but looks much older. Her husband, 65-year-old Kailung, works nearby, putting tags on the blouses. They greet me and introduce me to a few of the other workers, none of whom seem the least surprised to see me—an obviously Chinese woman—shows up, ostensibly to help Bibi and Kailung, and perhaps fall into a job for myself. The two are among the shop's few older employees—the sewing jobs are filled by young women, some in their teens. All of them have been working 14 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week, for the last three months. They put in the time because there is no guarantee that there will be more work once the current job is done. And because, with their limited English, they have few choices. "I'm so tired," says Bibi to no one in particular, "This job is going to kill me."

Overtime pay is unheard of. Everyone is paid a piece rate, determined by the garment and the task. A collar is worth more than a straight seam, for instance. In theory, piece rates are not meant to circumvent minimum wage and overtime laws, but to provide an incentive for more productive workers. In practice, however, low piece rates force everyone to work as hard, fast, and as long as they can to make the pennies add up. But no matter how hard they work, the pay almost never reaches minimum wage—a direct violation of federal labor laws.

For her 16 hours on this day, Bibi will take home about US\$50. In a good year, she may earn US\$13,000—about the norm among sweatshop workers.

Some, like Kailung, who brings home about US\$8,000 a year, earn much less because they can't work very fast. Good years have been few and far between for Bibi and Kailung who often end up out of work for long stretches. Since they never know if they will have work and money for the rent—from month to month, they live in substandard housing, putting dollars aside for the lean times. Bibi's only consolation is that she gets to keep everything she earns—no deductions for social security, unemployment insurance, or taxes. Bibi shrugs at the suggestion that the deductions could benefit her. "I need the money more," she says simply.

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When they finally leave the factory after midnight, Bibi and Kailung are so tired that they take a bus home. More often, they walk the two miles in order to save the US\$2.50 fare. Home is in the basement of a three-story house. The crudely finished space has been subdivided into a maze of three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Each of the bedrooms rents for US\$250 a month. Bibi and Kailung's room, a 12-by-12-foot cubicle with dark wood paneling that makes it seem even smaller, is filled with broken-down furniture. The old bureau has several missing drawers; no matter, the couple use the space as shelves to store plastic bags, screwdrivers, and an ancient radio. Bibi hurriedly heats up a dinner of Chinese dumplings and soup while Kailung washes their clothes in the bathtub and hangs them by the water heaters. After

they gulp down their soup, the first meal they've had since lunch, they collapse on the tattered sofa bed.

In the 84 years since the Triangle Shirt-waist fire killed 146 women workers caught behind locked doors in a Manhattan sweatshop, the fundamental production relationships that control the lives of garment workers haven't changed much. If anything, the workers' lot has worsened in recent decades. Nowadays, U.S. sweatshops are competing with those found in developing countries, a situation that is directly related to the abuse of the industry's main workforce—immigrant women of color.

Wherever garment manufacturers have set up shop, the workers have been primarily women. "The whole subcontracting stratum lends itself to employing women, particularly immigrant women, because their labor is valued less," says Elizabeth Petras, a professor of sociology at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

During the 1950s and 1960s, apparel manufacturers led the mostly unionized shops of the northern U.S. for the South, which offered a non-unionized, low-wage, female workforce. By the 1970s, much of the work had moved overseas. Asia's "four little dragons"—Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan—began to build their economies with the help of the U.S. apparel industry. Compared to an average hourly wage of US\$3.79 for U.S. garment workers in 1975, women in South Korea earned US\$0.22, US\$0.29 in Taiwan, and US\$0.75 in Hong Kong.

When labor costs in these countries began to edge up, manufacturers sought even cheaper labor in places like Sri Lanka or the People's Republic of China. Sewing shops boomed in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America because of their close proximity to the U.S. market

and thanks to U.S. trade policies that offered relief on import tariffs for apparel. Hourly wages for sewing-machine operators in 1991 ranged from a high of US\$0.50 in the Bahamas to US\$0.45 in Guatemala.

U.S. clothing imports from developing countries have grown from practically zero in the 1950s to about US\$86 billion a year today. Half of all clothes bought in the U.S. are made overseas, often produced under wretched conditions. In Bangladesh, girls as young as 10 work as indentured servants, locked in garment factories for 70- to 75-hour workweeks. In South Korea, 22 teenagers died in 1988 when the sweater factory where they lived and worked caught fire while they slept. Conditions are no better in the Americas: labor organizers in Guatemala have been killed, while women workers who merely signed petitions at a Levi Strauss plant in Honduras have suffered mass firings—a violation of Levi's own corporate guidelines.

When U.S. factories shut down to move overseas, they were replaced with sweatshops using immigrants desperate for work, often under unimaginable conditions. In one of the worst recent examples, 72 Thai immigrants were rescued last August from a guarded compound in Los Angeles, where they had been confined behind barbed wire, some for up to seven years, sewing garments for brand-name manufacturers at US\$1.60 an hour.

With the world a candy store of cheap labor, apparel manufacturers can and do get contractors to agree to almost any price. "Retailers use the club of China and Bangladesh to drive the price down," says Seth Bodner, executive director of the



Isis photobank

Women sewers wear uniforms and get better wages in this garments factory. They endure the same physical pain suffered by women sewers in sweatshops from the long hours spent bending over sewing machines.

National Knitwear and Sportswear Association. "They come back year after year asking for the same garment to be made for less money. With companies like Wal-Mart and J.C. Penney buying in such vast quantities, there's always someone who will do it if he thinks he can get a foot in the door."

The result of this global sweatshop process does not, however, necessarily lead to lower prices for the consumer. Two Liz Claiborne jackets that retail for US\$80 and are exactly alike may have been made by different workers at different wage rates in any of a half-dozen countries. But whether the labor cost is five cents or five dollars, the price charged to the consumer is the same.

At 7:30 on Sunday morning, Bibi and Kailung get ready to go back to work. Their bodies stiff with fatigue, they move slowly about the kitchen area. Kailung's face is swollen from a toothache that is so painful he can't eat. Instead, he prepares an herbal concoction in a glass jar to take to work. As Bibi packs a lunch of leftover rice, vegetables and hard-

boiled eggs, she complains about her living quarters. "This place is very dirty. My home in China was much nicer," she says. "In winter there's no heat. But it's all we can pay."

A permanent resident, Bibi emigrated from Shanghai in 1992; Kailung came last year. In China, Bibi would soon be retiring from her office job, while Kailung had already retired. They came to the U.S. in the hope of saving enough money to bring their grandchildren over. Despite their own working conditions, they believe the children will have a better life here. But if the job runs out, they'll be on the street. Bibi does not speak English well enough to find work as a cleaning woman or in a fastfood restaurant. Even with her green card, she can't quit.

By 9 a.m. they're at the shop. As the workers filter in, Bibi and Kailung sweep up piles of trash and debris from around the work stations. The floor looks as if an explosion dumped pink, yellow, green, and blue fabric everywhere. Most of the seamstresses are from a rural area of China's Guangdong province. Since Bibi and Kailung's Shanghai dialect is

quite different from theirs, they can't talk with their co-workers. The shop owner, a fortyish man also from Guangdong, speaks some Mandarin, as do Bibi and Kailung. In any case, language ability is not critical to the functioning of a garment shop, where tasks can be readily taught nonverbally.

Conversation lulls as the cadence picks up. The pressers start feeding hundreds of skirts to Bibi, who dispatches them to hangers and the proper rack, sized from 8 to 14. Kailung is supposed to be hanging skirts too, but his tooth hurts so much that he is sitting at an unoccupied sewing machine with his head down while Bibi tries—with my inexperienced help—to keep up with his work as well as hers. While the pressers steam their way through bundles of skirts, the seamstresses work on the matching jackets. Because fabrics are pliant and are stitched into curved shapes, the work must be done by hand, ensuring that the sewing process remains labor-intensive.

Now that garment shops can be set up anywhere, closing plants and shifting factory locations overseas are commonplace. Garment industry officials charge that free trade policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) threaten the survival of domestic apparel manufacturing, while worker advocates expect that "free trade" will add to job loss and increased pressure on the remaining workers.

At the U.S.-Mexico border, the impact of these changes is particularly intense. On the U.S. side, El Paso, Texas, is a center for the production of denim garments. Its twin city of Ciudad Juarez sits across the Rio Bravo del Norte in Mexico. Under a program devised in 1965, denim

production was to shift to Juarez, while corporate offices would remain in El Paso. As the factories moved to Juarez, where they could pay workers as little as US\$2.35 per day, sweatshops, called *talleres de hombre*—"starvation shops"—have cropped up in El Paso, hiring people laid off by the plant closings.

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According to *La Mujer Obrera* (The Working Woman), formed in 1981 to organize El Paso's garment workers, in the first year after NAFTA's passage, 11 of the city's garment factories closed, leaving a trail of unpaid wages behind. "At first, people get angry at Mexican workers," says Carmen Dominguez, coordinator of *La Mujer Obrera*. "But then we explain how those workers do the same work for less pay. In Mexico, the cost of living is the same as in El Paso and people would rather sell soda on the street than work in a garment factory. So who works in them? Thirteen- to 16-year-old girls. Now the workers get angry at the factory owners."

Anger is exactly what workers in San Antonio feel toward Levi Strauss. In 1989, one month after posting profits of US\$272 million, the company announced the closing of its San Antonio plant where 1,150 workers were employed. Production was moved to Costa Rica. The Latina seamstresses who lost their jobs formed a group called *Fuerza Unida* (United Strength) and filed suit, charging that Levi Strauss cheated them out of their fair share of severance and vacation pay, profit sharing, pensions, and

bonuses, leaving behind women with carpal tunnel syndrome and herniated discs, thanks to the intense work pace. The suit was dismissed, but the women have persisted, mounting a national boycott of Levi Strauss products and setting up an organizing office near the company's San Francisco headquarters. *Fuerza Unida* organizer Lupe Galvan points out that Levi's made US\$557 million in profits in 1994, a record year.

Levi's is hardly the exception. The U.S. apparel industry is valued at US\$50 billion a year and generated domestic retail sales of US\$172 billion in 1994. Seven companies do more than a billion in sales annually: Fruit of the Loom; Kellwood, which owns numerous sportswear labels; Levi Strauss; Liz Claiborne; Russell Corporation, the athletic wear manufacturer; Sara Lee, which has bought up several clothing companies, including the makers of Wonderbra; and VF Corporation, the manufacturer of Lee and Wrangler jeans, JanSport, and Healthex, among others. And as Edna Bonacich, professor of sociology and ethnic studies at the University of California at Riverside, who has been researching the sweating process, says, "the garment industry is like a tale of two cities." CEO and executive staff salaries are in the six-and seven-figure ranges, fringe benefits are worth many thousands, and stock options millions; meanwhile, garment workers are lucky if they earn US\$10,000 a year, far less than one percent of the executives' pay. "For a buck more per garment, the whole problem of sweatshop abuses could be solved," says a labor enforcement official.

At the sweatshop, everyone is busy except the boss, who is eating a bowl of noodles. At 11:30 a.m., a small entourage ar-



International Labour Office

Migrant women workers are not limited to Asians or Latin Americans or women from indigenous groups. Maria, 23, is a sewer from Yugoslavia. Several years ago, she joined her husband and the throng of migrant women workers in Germany.

rives: the owner's wife, son, daughter-in-law, and infant grandson. The son, a cheerful-looking twenty-something, with gold chains on his neck and wrists, starts working a steam press. His wife sits at a sewing machine and also begins working. Holding the baby, the boss's wife strolls into a side room where the time clock sits unused, surrounded by posters on state and federal labor laws—all printed in English. She turns on a radio that's piped into the shop: music with a loud disco beat that gets the machines humming faster than ever.

As the jackets are pressed, Bibi and Kailung pair them with skirts, then button on a satiny front panel. They attach tags, then bag the complete ensemble. They'll be paid 15 cents for each outfit. In 12 hours, and with my help, they'll do 400 sets—for a total of US\$60 between the two of them. The pressers and the seamstresses get about 24 cents for each outfit they work on. The total labor cost for assembling the

Sunday suit: under US\$3. Each will retail for about US\$60.

The aroma of rice and Chinese turnips in oyster sauce begins to waft through the shop—the boss has been cooking at a hotplate in the back. At noon he clears off one of the worktables. "Eat, eat!" he says. The workers walk over, then return quickly to their workstations to eat in silence. "The boss is cooking lunch for us because it's Sunday," says Bibi. Nevertheless, it's not a regular Sunday event. Within 15 minutes, everyone is finished eating, except the boss and his family, who hover like hosts proud to have treated their guests to a fine meal.

Manufacturers and retailers have been able to use the contractor system to insulate themselves from the unpleasantness of sweatshops and the embarrassment of government raids. They demand that contractors meet their prices for work that can't possibly be done

at minimum wage rates, yet they deny knowledge of abuses and reject responsibility for them if they are found. In reality, manufacturers know exactly what's going on in their contractors' shops—company inspectors and other representatives routinely visit the worksites.

The typical life span of a contractor's business is less than a year. If caught for violations, the contractor is likely to go out of business, only to immediately reappear under a new name, performing the same work for the same manufacturers and retailers to evade government fines, possible legal action and, most of all, responsibility for working conditions from which they directly benefit.

Labor law enforcement officials have been limited by too few resources. But in 1993 the U.S. Department of Labor began enforcing a rarely used provision of the Fair Labor Standards Act—the "hot goods" rule, which prohibits the shipping or selling

via interstate commerce of goods that have been produced "in violation of minimum wage and overtime laws." "Manufacturers try to insulate themselves," says Maria Echaveste, the department's Wage and Hour Administrator. "What we've done is shift it back to them." Using the threat of a hot goods injunction, the agency secured a US\$530,000 settlement against Guess?, Inc., after finding its US\$60 jeans in a Los Angeles shop where workers made less than US\$1 an hour, and they've obtained agreements with other manufacturers to police themselves.

To get money from increasingly conservative legislatures, labor officials must argue that compliance with labor laws is good for business. Companies that operate illegally have an unfair advantage over legitimate businesses. Taxpayers also lose when these underground businesses evade taxes and payments to unemployment and workers' compensation, and Social Security. But conservative politicians have begun to link labor enforcement to anti-immigrant rhetoric. Because sweatshops rely so heavily on immigrant labor, many politicians assert that undocumented workers are to blame for the existence of sweatshops. In both 1993 and 1994, California Governor Pete Wilson vetoed legislation that would make manufacturers jointly liable for wage and hour violations of the contractors they hire, saying that "ultimately the fault for sweatshops lie with illegal workers who are willing to work at substandard wages and conditions." Blaming sweatshops on immigrant labor may be part of a larger political strategy: "There are more U.S. sweatshops now and a greater tolerance for them; the threshold of what is acceptable treatment of workers is lower, says Drexel University's Elizabeth Petras.

The temperature in the shop is rising as the afternoon sun hits the windows. Bibi takes advantage of a break in the presser's work to rush to the bathroom. First she reaches into the cardboard box near her work area, where she hides her lunch and the house slippers she wears at work. She pulls out a roll of toilet paper. "You have to bring your own," she whispers. We go through the steel

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doors that are the shop's sole entrance and exit, back into the dark hallway strewn with refuse. To get to the women's room, we walk down several corridors, past other garment sweatshops. "That one is owned by Americans," she says, meaning Caucasians. "Americans work for them," by which she means non-Asians. All the factories in the building share the women's room. The doors on the two grimy wooden stalls don't shut. There is neither toilet paper nor paper towels, not even a trash can, so used paper products, including sanitary napkins, line the floor. The sinks are encrusted with food waste, dirt and grease. Bibi just shakes her head and leaves as fast as she can.

Back in the shop, the boss's son is picking up the bagged blouses that Bibi folded yesterday, and packing them in boxes. He looks furtively at boxes near Bibi that hold neatly stacked plastic hangers. When he thinks she isn't looking, he dumps out her hangers and takes the box. Bibi starts yelling at him. The son ignores her, until his father makes him put the hangers back.

Late in the evening, Bibi goes to an area piled high with linen vests. Each one has six tiny buttons. Her job is to button and sort them, for which she gets three cents per vest. The buttons are so small that it's hard to work them through the buttonholes. After doing several hundred buttons, Bibi's fingers are stiff and sore. Bibi and Kailung are expected to stay until all the vests are buttoned, pressed, hung, tagged, and bagged. But Bibi is so tired she's thinking of quitting.

"I don't want to die in this job," she says. Kailung, whose jaw has been aching all day, is also eager to leave. The boss talks them into staying by offering to drive them home when they're done. Reluctantly they agree. Bibi returns to the vests that bear two labels—one, the name of a popular mall retailer; the other, "Made in the U.S.A."

After 20 years in the garment industry, Katie Quan, manager of the Pacific Northwest District Council at the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE), is the first to acknowledge that these are challenging times. Quan is working in a consortium of California manufacturers, contractors, government officials, educators, and workers called Garment 2000—a US\$2.3 million project designed to reinvent the garment industry. They are teaching new management techniques like the Japanese "just-in-time" quickresponse systems, to help U.S. companies take advantage of their proximity to the U.S. marketplace. "U.S. workers have to define a niche in the global economy where companies can make money and workers can make a living. U.S. workers can't win in a competition based on the cheapness of labor," says Quan.

Growing consumer concern over the social cost of clothing has

Groups working for women and workers' rights and to improve work conditions in the garment industry:

Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA)

310 8th Street, Suite 301
Oakland, Calif. 94607
(510) 268-0192

Bilingual and bicultural organizers who promote leadership and empowerment among low-income immigrant women.

Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA)

PO Box 130401
New York N.Y. 10013
(212) 619-7979

Nonprofit association controlled by workers who organize for rights on the job and in the community at large.

Common Threads

PO Box 962
Venice, Calif. 90294
(310) 967-5122

A coalition—primarily made up of women—that attempts to educate consumers about sweatshop conditions.

Fuerza Unida

3946 S. Zarzamora Street
San Antonio, Tex. 78225
(210) 927-2294

Organized by women laid off from Levi Strauss, to “educate, activate and empower” the families and communities of low-income Mexican and Mexican/American women.

La Mujer Obrera (Centro Del Obreto Fronterizo)

PO Box 3975, El Paso, Tex. 79923
(915) 533-9710

Organizes against the deterioration of working and living conditions. Also operates a workers' school.

Latino Workers' Center (aka Lower East Side Workers' Center)

PO Box 20329
New York, N.Y. 10009
(212) 473-3936

Seeks to unify Latina/Latino immigrant workers through education and outreach. Operates the Latina Women's Development Project.

Sweatshop Watch

c/o Asian Law Caucus
468 Bush Street, 3rd Floor
San Francisco, Calif. 94108
(415) 391-1655

A coalition of labor, women's civil rights, immigrant rights, legal, and other organizations that work to eliminate sweatshop conditions domestically and globally.

spurred a number of recent developments. A women's group called Common Threads, based in Los Angeles, is linking middle-class and working-class women through consumer campaigns to support workplace organizing. “Two-thirds of the clothing purchases are made by women, who are manipulated a million ways as fashion consumers,” says sociologist Bonacich, one of the organizers of Common Threads.

Another group, called Sweatshop Watch, a coalition of workers' and immigrants' advocates, women's organizations, and legal and civil rights groups across California, is starting a newsletter to inform consumers about the clothes they purchase, providing “Buy” and “Don't Buy” lists. “Our approach is three-pronged,” says attorney Lora Jo Foo, an organizer of Sweatshop Watch: “making manufacturers liable through legislative change and legal action, empowering workers through

workplace organizing, and enlisting consumer support.” Around the country, workers' centers like Fuerza Unida, La Mujer Obrera, and AIWA joined this year in a national consortium to build a community-based workers' movement.

Consumer consciousness has caused some manufacturers and retailers develop guidelines, which often set forth high-sounding principles that support fair wages and environmentally sound practices. Yet even these companies continue to get caught in sweatshop violations. And ethics codes rarely cover the new and creative ways that employers come up with to transfer costs to workers. Earlier this year a California contractor was found to be charging seamstresses US\$126.75 plus tax, each month, for the needles and bobbins they used at work.

And the boycotts against Levi's and Jessica McClintock continue. McClintock attempted

to resolve the dispute in 1993 by offering an unspecified amount as a “charitable contribution” to the 12 seamstresses. Five women accepted the offer, while the rest decided to continue their battle for “corporate responsibility.” In the wake of the rejection, McClintock's company is waging its own battle, having hired one of San Francisco's biggest labor law firms to file lawsuits against AIWA.

“We don't expect Jessica McClintock to change the garment industry,” insists AIWA's Young Shin. “But it can be done—U.S. consumers have the bargaining power to tell the multinationals what their concerns are, to rid the garment industry of inhuman practices, and make it a humane place to work.

Helen Zia is a contributing editor to Ms. The names she used in this story are not real.

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