



WORKING WOMEN

SWEATFREE WORLD

FREEDOM AT WORK

STOP CHILD LABOR

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Sweatshop Frequently Asked Questions

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Aren't workers happy to have jobs in apparel, toy and electronics factories and on plantations? After all, don't these companies provide lots of jobs, especially in developing countries?

Indeed, these companies have brought many new jobs to all parts of the developing world. ILRF is not against trade. However, having a job in manufacturing or on a company farm should not mean having to be subjected to starvation wages, physical and verbal abuse, excessive overtime or a life threatening work environment. Nor should workers be deprived of the right to bargain collectively. Workers want to be treated with dignity, and expect to be able to support themselves and their families with their earnings. These conditions could easily be addressed by companies.

How does this affect me? Aren't sweatshops only a problem in developing countries?

The globalization of the economy has caused many manufacturing industries to move to developing countries, where wages are far lower than for comparable work performed in developed countries. But sweatshops and other labor problems are still being found in developed countries - including the U.S. - and factories with good conditions in the U.S. and Canada, as well as in other countries, are shutting down. By making competition contingent on labor costs, companies are forcing everyone into a "race to the bottom"; in order to maintain jobs in manufacturing, workers must compete to see who will accept the lowest wages and the worst working conditions. When workers rights are protected, workers everywhere benefit.

Improved working conditions ensure that jobs in the developing world truly lift more people out of poverty, creating stable societies. Workers paid a decent wage can purchase goods from abroad, including from wealthy countries. Respecting freedom of association in the developing world strengthens trade unions in the developed world. Better labor inspections of factories at home and abroad may yield information on product safety, as well, protecting consumers from dangerous pesticides in food, lead in paint, and faulty parts in everything from toys to machinery. Finally, obeying national and international labor provisions strengthens the rule of law, both within countries and internationally. If sweatshops create a broad, downward spiral, eliminating sweatshops contributes in innumerable ways to your own way of life.

Do you have a list of which companies do and don't use sweatshops?

Unfortunately, no. One of the difficulties in fighting sweatshops is the fact that corporations are not required to disclose the locations of their factory locations around the world. Even when the factory locations are known, there are a multitude of obstacles to ensuring that companies are employing fair labor practices. While many companies claim to have eliminating sweatshop

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conditions by instituting their own codes of conduct, exploitative labor practices continue to be revealed in their factories, revealing the ineffectiveness of such policies. Worker rights advocate are making progress, however, in instituting independent monitoring in factories around the world, and in requiring full disclosure of companies' factories around the world. There are, however, several initiatives for social labeling and fairly traded goods.

Here are a few resources:

- [Co-Op America's Responsible Shopper](#)
- [Transfair](#)
- [Shop with a Conscience Consumer Guide](#)

Why target some companies if others are just as bad?

Targeting certain companies like Gap, Starbucks or Exxon is effective for several reasons. First, the financial power of these companies allows them to wield tremendous influence and create greater pressure on countries and workers. Their financial power also means that they can afford to change their labor conditions; such changes could easily be made without changing the average price for products. Second, these companies are leaders in their industry, and highly visible to consumers. Targeting highly visible companies and creating consumer demand for these companies to treat their workers fairly is a key part of changing practices in the whole industry. Finally, some of these companies claim to have already responded to human rights problems by instituting their own codes of conduct; their workers, however, continue to deal with exploitative conditions.

