

The New York Times

Why Not Unions to Combat Sweatshops?

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To the Editor:

Re: "How an American Industry Gets Away With Slave Labor" (Week in Review, Aug. 20):

It is disturbing that a published interview with Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich on exploitation of workers makes no mention of the most effective remedy for mistreatment: strong unions. Empirical evidence confirms that nonunion workers are more likely to endure sweatshop conditions than are union members. In 1994, for example, union members' earnings were 37 percent higher than for unrepresented workers.

While Mr. Reich mentions the Fair Labor Standards Act as one weapon against worker exploitation, the National Labor Relations Act has historically been the most valuable tool. Passed in 1935, it established the legal right of private-sector workers to organize unions. Its supporters argued that the inequality of bargaining power between employers and unorganized employees substantially burdened the flow of commerce by depressing wage rates and the purchasing power of wage earners.

The act endorsed unionization: "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States to eliminate . . . obstructions to the free flow of commerce . . . by encouraging the practice . . . of collective bargaining."

Two years after its passage, the N.L.R.A.'s constitutionality was upheld by the Supreme Court. Then, Chief Justice Charles E. Hughes wrote: "Long ago we stated the reason for labor organizations. We said that they were organized out of the necessities of the situation; that a single employee was helpless in dealing with an employer; . . . that if the employer refused to pay him the wages he thought fair, he was nevertheless unable to leave the employ and resist arbitrary and unfair treatment; [the] union was essential to give laborers opportunity to deal on an equality with their employer."

In the years that followed, millions of workers organized and lifted themselves out of sweatshop conditions. In 1945 unionization peaked at 35.5 percent of the work force. From 1950 to 1960, average weekly earnings rose 23 percent. This was the largest sustained rise in living standards in the 20th century and occurred in the only decade when union density remained above 30 percent.

After unionization dipped below 30 percent in 1962, wages rose more slowly. As union density continued to fall, from 1972 to 1995, workers' earnings declined steadily and, to our nation's shame, slave labor has re-emerged in our economy.

That any published conversation on sweatshops, especially with a United States Labor Secretary, can make no mention of labor unions is incredible. Worker exploitation is not insoluble. Renewing our commitment to collective bargaining is a first step.

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