

# Only you can prevent sweatshops

## Activists say it's time consumers take Third World forced labour seriously

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Groups of teenagers wandering aimlessly? Check. Well-dressed ladies clicking around on high heels, arms laden with bags? Check. Smell of grease from the food court. Check. Inner debate that ensues upon finding the perfect shirt with a label that says "Made In Indonesia?" Check. So transpires a typical day at the mall for most Calgarians.

At this point, the global sweatshop stories behind the majority of our everyday goods are hardly news to anyone. High-profile campaigns against Nike, Gap and Wal-Mart have shed light on the millions of factory workers around the world who toil long hours for wages that fail to buoy them above the poverty level. This workforce, consisting mostly of women, is often forced into working exorbitant amounts of overtime, subjected to physical and emotional abuse and denied of their right to form unions that could ameliorate their situation.

A recent report issued by Oxfam International explores today's reality of global manufacturing. Entitled Trading Away Our Rights, the report calls on Western consumers to take a more active role in insisting that retailers and brands adopt practices that uphold workers rights worldwide. Given that we live in a free country with free markets, sweatshops are ultimately what we, as consumers, have chosen and continue to choose. Awareness doesn't seem to be the problem, as most of us know about the issue. We just don't know what to do to make it better.

"Consumers need to start thinking about their products past the time you use it," says Ian Thomson of the Maquila Solidarity Network, a Canadian network that promotes solidarity with sweatshop workers around the world with the goal of improving conditions and winning a living wage.

"What happens to it before it ends up on the store shelf? How does your product impact the lives of others around the world?" If you follow Thomson's instructions, don't be quiet about it.

"Consumers need to start talking to your retailers. Tell them you want fair trade conditions. Make your opinion heard. Fill out suggestion cards," says Mary Sue



Smiaroski, Policy Advisor for Oxfam Canada. "And be sure to support the companies that give you the answers you want to hear." Buy fair trade. Buy union made. Support retailers who do not rely on exploitation to manufacture their products.

The websites for Oxfam Canada and Maquila Solidarity Network are both great resources for consumers. Oxfam's offers a wealth of information about global manufacturing, while Maquila Solidarity Network's covers every aspect of taking action. For the loud activists among us, Maquila Solidarity Network's teachings include how to hold sweatshop fashion shows, how to lobby politicians and, of course, sweatshop carolling for the holidays. For quieter activists, the site offers online petitions, how to research the origins of clothing and letter-writing campaigns. As Maquila Solidarity Network always has several campaigns in which you can get involved right away, a visit to their website offers instant gratification for all of your activist tendencies.

Locally, the Calgary No Sweat Coalition also welcomes your activism.

"When faced with such a large issue, people are unsure if anything they do can make a difference. We want Calgarians to know they can make a differ-

ence," says Estelle Kuzyk, chair of the Human Rights Committee of the Calgary and District Labour Council, one of many groups involved in the Coalition. The Coalition is asking the City of Calgary to follow the lead of cities around the world in adopting a No Sweat Purchases and Procurement Code of Conduct. Implementation of this code would require all suppliers of the city's garments, uniforms and other apparel to ensure that their manufacturing does not rely on deplorable employment conditions such as forced labour, child labour and harassment, abuse or discrimination.

"I don't want my tax dollars to be used to support sweatshop practices," Kuzyk explains. She implores anyone who agrees with her to show their support for the coalition. "The situation is dire. It all has to start somewhere. Even your signature helps us out tremendously."

While these grassroots approaches do make a considerable difference, systemic changes are needed to allow consumers to make informed choices. As it stands, a label proclaiming "Made in Indonesia" provides little insight to the worldwide plethora of factories that may have contributed components of each garment.

With the goal of enabling ethi-

cal consumerism, the Ethical Trading Action Group (ETAG), made up of various Canadian labour and human rights organizations, initiated their Disclosure Campaign in January of 2001. Heralded as one of the most important battles in the stop sweatshops movement, the campaign is demanding amendments to Canada's Textile Labeling Act that would force Canadian clothing retailers to disclose to the public the names and addresses of each of the production sites used in the manufacturing of their clothing.

The information would allow Canadian consumers to link particular abuses and struggles at factories around the world to specific brands and articles of clothing.

The federal minister of industry has approved a two-step method for tackling the proposed changes and is currently in the process of the second step, a public policy forum involving various stake-

holders, from ETAG to consumer groups to corporations.

Once complete, a decision will be made by the Minister on ETAG's proposal. To date, there is no telling what the outcome may be. Despite poll findings that suggest over 80 per cent of Canadians would support these changes, the amendments are being met with strong opposition from the industry.

As the minister slowly continues with her final steps of consideration, activists are watching her carefully. And so should we. Her decision stands to revolutionize the typical mall visit for Calgary consumers.

### Web resources

- Oxfam Canada: [www.oxfam.ca](http://www.oxfam.ca)
- The Maquila Solidarity Network: [www.maquilasolidarity.org](http://www.maquilasolidarity.org)
- No Sweat Calgary Coalition: [members.shaw.ca/cdlc](http://members.shaw.ca/cdlc) or call the Calgary and District Labour Council at 262-2390.