Governments Should Not Boycott Sweatshop Products

*Child Labor and Sweatshops, 2011*

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To many Americans, sweatshops seem horrific, with back-breaking hours and unhealthy working conditions—so much so that the honorable reaction ought to be a boycott of sweatshop products. In reality, however, boycotting such products would deprive workers the opportunity to rise above poverty, and deprive countries the opportunity to develop effective economies. Although it is not a pretty picture, the sweatshop system has proved to be successful—Japan’s current economy is an example—and should be allowed to run its course.

Even in our modern world, sweatshops remain a horrifying reality, with hundreds of thousands of the world’s poor and defenseless people exploited by wealthy factory owners and greedy supervisors. Their jobs, perhaps better termed slavery, involve back-breaking hours in pitiful conditions, sometimes using toxic chemicals without adequate ventilation or protective gloves or goggles, for pennies per day. Stories of children stitching fancy beadwork by candlelight at midnight, female workers forced to provide sexual favors to keep their jobs and workers refusing to drink fluids in sweltering heat to prevent the necessity of bathroom breaks are all too common and all too true.

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So, how could there be a good side to this? And why would any self-respecting industrialized nation purchase products made in such a fashion? The instinctive, gut-level reaction is to boycott these goods; is that wrong?

In a word, yes.

**Better than the Alternative**

On average, the employees of sweatshops work there because they have no better alternative. Children work in such conditions, not instead of going to school but because they have no school to attend or no means to support themselves if they do. Parents work there because the alternative is watching their children drop out of school and work ... or starve.

It’s a painful fact that boycotting goods made by sweatshop labor only hurts the workers, not the factory owners. In 1993, a U.S. boycott forced Bangladeshi factories to quit utilizing child labor. According to Oxfam [a group of nongovernmental organizations working to fight poverty and injustice], most of those displaced children were forced into worse positions, including prostitution—when their first choice had been to sew
clothing for Wal-Mart shoppers.

Being without better alternatives, the people who have sweatshop jobs are often glad to have them and see them as a positive beginning for a better life. [Journalists] Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for their coverage of China's Tiananmen Square massacre [involving a 1989 student protest], recounted multiple stories of Chinese sweatshop workers who were puzzled when Western journalists bemoaned their twelve-hour-plus workdays, seven days per week. More than one young woman they interviewed said how great it was that the factory allowed them to work such long hours, and others commented they had taken that job deliberately over others in the area to earn more hourly pay.

Since that interview in 1987, more companies invested in the area and additional factories opened across southern China. Although this workers' state could still use a few stout labor unions, workers are now more mobile, wages have more than quintupled and conditions have improved as factories compete for the best workers. More people now work for private industry than for the state (although it's also true that unemployment has risen as a result). Although the yuan's [Chinese currency] exchange rate is still controlled by the government, its purchasing power has risen to approximately one-sixteenth that of the U.S. dollar. The rivers of bicycles once common in Chinese cities are being replaced by cars and even SUVs [sport utility vehicles], with gasoline subsidized by the government.

Opportunity for Betterment

According to an article by [entrepreneur and chief executive officer of the nonprofit Flow] Michael Strong in 2006, roughly 1.2 million people rise above poverty in China every month by moving to an urban area and taking a job that pays less than US$2 per day. He claims that Wal-Mart, through allowing developing economies access to industrialized markets, has helped more of the world's desperately poor than the World Bank and relates the story of a Mongolian student who, when he heard U.S. college students ripping into sweatshops, shouted out, "Please, give us your sweatshops!"

Strong also points out, quite correctly, that a line must be drawn between criminal exploitation and market economics. Workers deserve decent wages and working conditions that won't kill them, not only in developed nations but also in the backwoods of beyond. But to achieve that requires not fewer sweatshops but more of them, clustered together to create competition for workers in the Chinese pattern.

If China continues growing at its current rate, in 2031 it will reach a standard of living comparable to that in the U.S. It's the same path taken by Japan in the 1950s and 1960s and the Asian tigers [Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan] in the 1970s and 1980s.

It's an ugly path, dirty and brutal. But it's proven to work. Can the same be said for other forms of foreign aid?

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