

SWEATED LABOR: THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND REFORM

Introduction

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Sweatshops are very much in fashion, favored as a strategy of global capitalism and flexible specialization, fought against by union and student activists, and featured in exposes in the daily press and on TV news. Hundreds of thousands of men, and especially women, in dozens of countries across the globe currently work in conditions considered sweated by one of the several definitions that are used by trade unionists, academics, activists, and workers themselves. Hundreds of thousands more will spend at least a part of their working lives in the export processing zones and *maquiladores* of the Caribbean, Latin America, India, and South East and East Asia. Tens of thousands will migrate to the United States, where sweatshops once again abound in major cities, such as Los Angeles and New York. Far from being an aberration or an archaic holdover from an earlier era of industrialization, the sweatshop has proven to be an integral part of modern capitalism.

The contributors to this issue join a growing number of academics from several disciplines who are studying sweated labor in both its present and past manifestations. The articles, interview, and review essay that follow do not seek to define sweatshops but rather to explore the politics of definition and representation. How have sweatshops been imagined in different countries and periods? What causes of sweated labor have been posited and what effects documented or ignored? Who are considered to be the victims and who the beneficiaries of this industrial system? Perhaps most importantly, what are the consequences of different representations for the politics of sweatshop reform? How do we assess the successes and failures of the different reform strategies pursued in different countries and periods? Throughout the issue authors have sought to analyze how the local and the global intersected in sweatshops and in the lives of their workers and how sweated labor relates to seemingly more modern forms of capitalist production. Contributions, whose chronological focus ranges from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, suggest both striking continuities in the conditions in sweatshops and dramatic differences in their location and labor force and in the strategies used to both criticize and combat them.

The issue opens with articles by Daniel Bender and Sheila Blackburn, who revisit the classic era of sweated labor in the nineteenth and early twentieth cen-

tury United States and Britain respectively. Both offer rich portraits of the many and conflicting ways in which sweatshops were defined and imagined by politicians, journalists and reformers as well as by workers, unionized and not.

Bender's study of "Sweatshop Subjectivity and The Politics of Definition and Exhibition" focuses on the turn of the century United States when the term sweatshop was first used and in quite different ways by factory inspectors and immigrant workers. Their conflicting perceptions and discursive representations were shaped as much by the context of nativism, immigration, labor activism and social anxiety as by the actual conditions in garment shops. Sounding a theme that echoes in other essays, Bender notes that the dangers that sweated labor presented to the lives of workers and the middle class fabric of society were perceived by workers and reformers in markedly different ways, thereby complicating strategies for the regulation or elimination of sweatshops. He concludes with a provocative discussion of the problems public historians face when trying to create sweatshop exhibits that do justice not only to social conditions but equally to subjective perceptions of them.

In "'Princesses and Sweated-Wage Slaves Go Well Together': Images of British Sweated Workers, 1843–1914," Sheila Blackburn offers a sweeping and vivid survey of the diverse images of sweating in Britain and of the reform strategies they entailed. From the "discovery" of sweated labor in the 1840s through the 1906 sweated trade exhibit, replete with live workers, from Thomas Hood and Henry Mayhew through such Christian Social reformers as Charles Kingsley to turn of the century government investigators, such as Beatrice Potter (Webb), participants in the debates about sweating disagreed about virtually every issue. Was sweating a system of industrial production or a character of many types of labor in factories and outdoors as well as in small shops? Was subcontracting a defining and causal characteristic of sweated labor? Were the main victims of sweating the thousands of women employed or the skilled male workers whom they ostensibly displaced? And who was responsible for sweating? Lax politicians? Middlemen, who in the English case were coded as foreign and often Jewish? Or capitalism, which created and recreated sweating in innumerable trades? These questions continue to haunt debates about sweatshops. Blackburn adroitly shows that most nineteenth century representations of sweated labor exposed only selected aspects of a pervasive problem and actually blocked reform. Only when sweated labor was discursively linked to national efficiency did the government seek to regulate some sweated trades.

Such regulation, however important, by no means eliminated sweated labor, which was and is reproduced by the logic of capitalism's search for cheaper labor, higher profits and greater competitiveness at home and abroad. Sweatshops have occupied a more or less prominent place in different national economies in the last century and a half. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, sweatshops were both pervasive and well studied and critiqued across Europe and in North America, but we know little about their presence elsewhere. The sweatshop "returned" to those areas in the second half of the twentieth century, not merely in the last two feverish decades of globalization but

from the early 1960s on. That return is analyzed in two studies focusing on the New York City garment industry. If the focus of the essays by Carmen Whalen and Xiaolan Bao is local, the connections they uncover are global. The decline and transformation of the New York City garment trades from male, skilled and high waged to overwhelmingly immigrant, female and low paying both helped cause and reflect global processes of export-oriented development abroad, deindustrialization and sweating at home, and migration within and between countries. These processes have reshaped the economic and social fabric not only of New York City but also of the countries to which the garment industry has gone and from which it draws workers.

Carmen Whalen's "Sweatshops Here and There: The Garment Industry, Latinas, and Labor Migrations" focuses on the complex experiences of migration and labor for two different groups of Latina workers, Puerto Rican women in the first post-war decades and Dominican women in more recent ones. As she persuasively documents, the arrival of these successive waves of Latina garment workers in New York City can only be understood in the context of transformations of the economies of the Caribbean. Puerto Rico was the first export processing zone for the garment industry and the model for what developed subsequently in the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America. The newly arrived garment factories drew women migrants from the countryside to towns and cities in their homeland. As export-oriented development weakened their national economies, many travelled to New York and other American cities with garment sweatshops. Although often overlooked in migration studies, women occupied a central place in international labor migration and often found work more easily than men. Whalen's essay draws on rich interview data with garment workers to show how different waves of Latina labor migrants experienced the structural changes that created sweated labor in their country of birth and in the United States. She traces the repeated patterns of these different groups of Latinas, emphasizing their separate but similar interactions with a shrinking and deteriorating garment industry in New York City.

In her study of a new generation of Chinese sweatshops and sweatshop workers, Xiaolan Bao analyzes both similarities and significant differences between the new sweatshops in places like Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and the older ones in Manhattan's Chinatown. Drawing on extensive interviews with both owners and workers, Bao investigates the ever-changing but ever-gendered division of labor and the complex pressures women workers face due to family obligations, limited English, and precarious immigration status. The co-ethnic nature of the Sunset Park sweatshops, she argues, both benefits and restricts workers, enmeshing them in complex relationships with employers who aid as well as exploit them, albeit in unequal measure. Her work reminds us of the importance of context, of the specificity of particular locales and shops.

Workers' responses to the new wave of sweatshops, Bao shows, was shaped not only by co-ethnicity but also by (mis)understandings of the causes of increased competition, pressure on wages and required overtime. Many Cantonese blame new immigrants from Fujian, who are ostensibly more compliant,

undocumented, and loyal to themselves or their families but not to their co-workers. Bao concludes with questions about how one might best combat sweatshops in a time of decreasing unionization, continued globalization, inadequate government intervention, and persistent trade union parochialism in the face of an ever more diverse garment industry labor force.

The last two pieces grapple with the prospects and challenges of combating sweatshops by analyzing new forms of anti-sweatshop activism that are transnational, consumption oriented, and student as well as union-based. In “The Ideal Sweatshop? Gender and Transnational Protest,” Ethel Brooks examines the contradictory character of transnational campaigns about sweatshop labor in El Salvador and offers an insightful analysis of their potential and their limitations. Her study of transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns that originate in first world cities but have as their object third world factories and the women who work there is based on ethnographic fieldwork and a complex analysis of the flow of images, discourses, resources, and people between places like New York and San Salvador. Like Blackburn, Brooks is concerned with the complex ways in which representations of women operate in discourses about and protests against sweatshops. Cognizant of the power relationships at play in transnational campaigns, Brooks argues that even as transnational protest tries to reform sweatshops abroad and contest globalization from above, it creates a globalization from below, with its own hierarchies. When transnational campaigns bring Salvadorian women garment workers on speaking tours, they rely on dominant assumptions about gender, race and nation, seeing women most often as victims who must be spoken for by others. These campaigns posit first world cities as a universal global and third world areas as the aberrant local. They tend to normalize sweatshops even as they protest and sometimes curb their excessive exploitation.

Kitty Krupat offers a different perspective on the current state of anti-sweatshop activism in “Rethinking the Sweatshop,” an interview with three students who have been intensively involved in United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS). As in the pieces by Whalen and Bao, the importance of oral history to understanding both sweatshops and protests against them emerges clearly here. Krupat and her interviewees touch on many of the issues Brooks did: the pros and cons of consumer oriented protest, the difficulties of transnational organizing, and the class and race issues that arise not only in transnational campaigns but also within USAS itself. The three student activists offer revealing insights on the rhetorical strategies used for representing sweatshops and mobilizing students. These show the centrality of consumption issues for USAS and the emphasis on democratic decision making or its absence rather than on capitalism as a system. Although USAS emerged in universities and singled out goods made with university logos under sweated conditions, there are now conflicting views about the place of the sweatshop in student activism and about the relationship of anti-sweatshop protests to living wage campaigns and other university labor struggles. These fruitful and important debates reveal the difficulties of linking and balancing the local and the transnational.

Jefferson Cowie concludes the discussion of sweated labor with a review essay of several major works on sweatshops. He returns to the themes that have cropped up repeatedly. How have sweatshops been represented and what is at stake analytically and politically in different definitions and imaginings? Why has sweated labor persisted and how has it been perpetuated in forms and locales that are both strikingly similar and ever changing? How have workers experienced sweated labor past and present and how can we capture the profoundly gendered character of those experiences? Cowie concludes not with a critique of past or present strategies for combating sweatshops but rather with a “dream” of how we might overcome them by a radical embrace of consumer activism. His dream, Krupat’s interview and Brooks critical ethnography all highlight the abundance of new ideas and forms of activism. None are without contradictions and limitations but each reminds us of the need to think and act in new and creative ways about a problem that is as integral to early twenty-first century capitalism as it was to that of the late nineteenth century and much more pervasive geographically.

This issue began as a joint project with Louise Tilly and its broad contours reflect our early discussions. Due to illness, Louise was not able to see the project through to completion. This issue is dedicated to her with thanks for her many contributions to *ILWCH* over the years.