

“GARMENT WORKERS WORLDWIDE: PROMOTING A GLOBAL DIALOGUE”
Millennium Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles, California
October 11-13, 2001

The purpose of this dialogue was to discuss the changing global economy and its impact on the health needs and working conditions of garment workers both within the U.S. and abroad. Toward that end, our goal was to better understand the interconnectedness across borders and the possibilities for organizing. We anticipated that by sharing the commonalities and differences in the apparel industry among the various countries represented at the gathering, regarding the working situations and strategies for organizing, we would arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the multinational scope of the industry as well as the possibilities for the overall improvement of garment workers’ living conditions. For indeed, one cannot understand what is occurring in Mexico or Canada or most any country, without knowing what is taking place in the U.S. The reverse is true as well.

THE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Major implications for the garment industry throughout the Americas result from economic restructuring. In Canada, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has led to the lowering of tariffs and the increase in imports from Asia and Mexico. Hence, Canada’s garment industry has faced increased competition. Its response? To "downsize," by closing down and shifting production to Mexico, Central America and, to a lesser degree, Asia. Furthermore, Canada turned to a different just-in-time market, namely the high tech, high fashion industry.

Of course, the key to the restructuring in Canada’s garment industry, as everywhere else, is cutting costs to increase profits. As a result, Canada has experienced a loss of union jobs (from approximately 80,000 in 1980 to 20,000 in 2000), along with an increase in home work, quick turnovers, smaller workshops (75% of industry employ less than 50 workers), labor rights violations (e.g., the failure to pay the legal minimum

wage or overtime), and intermittent and fluctuating work hours for the garment workers (most of whom are Asian and, to a lesser degree, Latin American immigrant women).

The strategy of organizers in Toronto includes organizing workers in a non-union coalition, The Labour Behind the Label, which publicizes labor rights violations and establishes organizing strategies and policy options. A nationwide mobilization effort, The Ethical Trading Action Group (ETAG), in which the Maquila Solidarity Network is a part, publicizes the plight of Canada's garment workers. ETAG's current campaign includes pressuring the Canadian government to force industries to identify all production sites and encouraging consumers' activism.

Herberto Juárez Núñez, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Puebla, Mexico

Mexico also experiences the economic restructuring encountered by the U.S. and Canada; however, it does so in a different way than its NAFTA partners. On the one hand, Mexico is the recipient of manufacturing jobs in the garment industry fleeing from the 'First World,' such as the U.S. and Canada (559,073 in 1995 to 1,014,896 in 2001). On the other hand, since NAFTA, Mexicans have been displaced from the land in greater numbers, where multinationals have relocated their maquilas. So now, not only do these Mexican workers earn such low wages that they are incapable of supporting their families, but they are also no longer in possession of land which would allow them to supplement their poor wages. A compelling alternative to these increasingly bad working conditions for Mexicans is migration, both internally within Mexico, and across the northern border to the U.S.

In Central America, the economic trends of the last twenty to thirty years are similar to those in Mexico, with the region opening trade agreements with Chile, Mexico, and other countries. Central America—where workers are paid even less than those employed in that country just north of this region—has also experienced an increase in the number of garment and electronic industries. In fact, hundreds of big name maquilas and eight free trade zones are presently located in El Salvador. Of concern are the working conditions, as well as the health and safety conditions of these workers.

Ana Lucrecia Bautista, Comisión de Verificación de Códigos de Conducto (COVERCO), Zdo. Nivel, Guatemala

Working independently from the Guatemalan government, COVERCO's role in that country includes monitoring and periodic evaluation of compliance along with interviewing and interacting with the workers, and supporting these workers' struggles for their labor rights. However, COVERCO states very clearly that it is not a union or advocacy group.

COVERCO has worked with the employees at Liz Claibourne in their attempts to organize. COVERCO is presently monitoring several industries including Liz Claiborne and The Gap, and periodically informs these major manufacturers of illegal working conditions and labor violations in their factories.

Dulceamor Navarrete, Grupo de Monitoreo Independiente de El Salvador (GMIES), San Salvador, El Salvador

Working with four factories, within the last year, the Independent Monitor Group of El Salvador has documented the conditions in apparel factories, and made its findings available to the labels, the workers, the general public, and if applicable, the union.

Our speaker pointed out that although unions are theoretically legal in El Salvador, if 35% of the workers in a shop agree to union representation, it remains quite difficult to unionize. Any attempt at organizing is repressed and existing laws do not protect union organizers. Moreover, when workers vote for unionization, the union's right to exist are rarely honored. However, despite the odds, the first union was formed in 1996, and now, six years later, conditions have improved in that factory.

THE CALIFORNIA PERSPECTIVE

In the present stage of capitalism, government protection of workers and the working class is eroding (e.g., deregulation, attacks on welfare, international pursuit of neo-liberalism, purely market-driven economy). This "race to the bottom," and the degradation of working conditions occur as a result of letting the market "loose," the increased mobility of capital, growing fragmentation of factories, and the weakening of unions internationally. The garment industry is just one of the many industries facing

this problem, and the employers are caught in the middle—between the needs and rights of the workers, on one hand, and the increasing competition and demands of a monolithic economic order, on the other. This stage of capitalism is racialized internationally, in a new configuration of colonization of the "Third World" workforce.

Although Los Angeles still contains the largest number of garment factories in the country, the loss of apparel jobs in this city has become a more frequent occurrence since NAFTA. Garment shops close down regularly and the workers are fired.

Another troubling consequence of the changing global economy is the growing trafficking of women across international borders. California is a destination for trafficked domestic workers, restaurant and garment workers and women forced or coerced into prostitution. Race and, obviously, gender play a large role in who is transported across international borders (these women come largely from the Southern Hemispheric Countries and Eastern Europe), frequently against their will or under false pretenses. They live under horrendous conditions, in debt bondage, where their visas are confiscated and where they experience physical confinement and sexual abuse. While enslaved workers constitute a relatively small segment of the work force, their numbers appear to be increasing globally. In fact, a number of developing countries in the Southern Hemisphere rely on trafficking as part of their national development strategies. Hence, traffickers often work in collusion with the governments of those counties, as well as with employers.

Several conference participants spoke of the importance of a multiple-strategies approach. The strategies mentioned included monitoring, implementation and/or enforcement of policies and regulations, collaboration with university researchers and institutions, multi-organizational and multinational organizing, and political mobilizations.

Unlike other parts of California, where noncompliance (with labor laws and health and safety regulations) rates fall between 60 and 70 percent, a significant improvement in monitoring has taken place in San Francisco (within six years, noncompliance fell from 70% to the current 25% noncompliance rate). The key to successful monitoring was not elaborated on during this discussion, but it certainly warrants further discussion.

Public policy is an avenue that works best in conjunction with other strategies. This strategy requires the reliance on the court system against contractors as well as manufacturing labels, along with pressuring legislators to create new public policies and regulations. In terms of the judicial approach, the first major case in the U.S. was that of the Thai workers in El Monte, California (refer to Su and Martorell's article in the conference packet). Policies discussed at this conference included the U.S. law, The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, and the on-site code of conduct implemented—to varying degrees of success—in different countries.

A third strategy is to collaborate with a consortium of international teams of university researchers. Along these lines, the University of California at Santa Cruz Summer Institute provides space for activists from different countries to congregate and share their experiences and knowledge. The Institute also provides training in computers, fundraising, and economics, and offers fieldtrips to Latino communities in the Monterey Bay area.

UNITE in the U.S. made the strategic decision to no longer organize in the garment industry. In Canada as well, UNITE dismantled the existing unions and severed its community ties. As traditional labor unions draw away from organizing garment workers, a new approach to organizing has emerged, one that must continue and be improved upon. An existing example is the Garment Workers Center in downtown Los Angeles which opened in January 2001 and functions largely as a general clearinghouse for the Asian (primarily Chinese) and Latina garment workers it services.

Future challenges involve altering the structure of unionization to address the new problems in this shifting economy and the needs of a changing (largely immigrant and female) workforce. Recent victorious union struggles resulted partially from innovative organizing strategies. Among such strategies are international organizing (e.g., supply chain organizing) and lobbying for an industry-wide code of conduct changes.

Political mobilization includes very concrete and sustained actions, such as Sweatshop Watch. An additional example is the anti-sweatshop movement, which has taken root with students on university campuses throughout the country and has joined forces with the anti-globalization movement.

A discussion ensued among the participants at the conference regarding tactics, which compel manufacturers to respond to evidence of labor exploitation in their shops. Strategies exerted in the various countries involved pressure from organizations, as well as from the public and the workers themselves.

The upcoming International Labor Organizing (ILO) Conference in Geneva was suggested as a date to work toward. Garment worker unions would attend and officially address the ILO members.

PLENARY DISCUSSION ON GLOBAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Gary Gareffi from Duke University set the context, presented the patterns of competition in the apparel industry, and discussed the need to move between the global and the regional/local. He explained where the changes in U.S. apparel industry have taken place during the period 1990 to 1998. With NAFTA, while the design and marketing component of production (the highest paid element) remains in the U.S., Mexico, for example, is producing the textile, and participating in more divisions in the apparel commodity chain. The example offered was Torreón, in the Mexican state of Coahuila.

Gareffi observed that the implications for the workers in Mexico are diverse. In Torreón, for instance, jobs increased from 12,000 in 1993 to 75,000 in 2000, and a higher rate of implementation of the code of conduct has taken place. However, the pace of production has increased, without a proportional rise in real wages. Moreover, these industries will continue to move. It is possible that while part of the industry will remain in Torreón, much of the production will move further into the interior of Mexico as well as into other countries (Gareffi has, since the conference, informed us that at least 8,000 apparel jobs have left Mexico and the Mexican maquila sector has suffered through a yearlong recession).

After the presentation, during discussion, several attendees commented that they were not convinced, from their own observations that the working conditions in Mexico had improved since the implementation of NAFTA. On the contrary, many workers had been paid better previously, during pre-NAFTA.

Lynda Yanz, of the Maquila Solidarity Network, discussed possible ways to pressure the industry to be more responsive to workers' needs. One challenge for our movement, she asserted, is to ensure that international anti-sweatshop movement strategies respond to workers' concrete concerns. Too often, strategies are developed without the input of workers and/or their representatives.

Yanz noted that the solidarity and anti-sweatshop movement has had precedent setting victories: for example, the reinstatement of workers at the Gap supplier Mandarin (now Charter) factory in El Salvador in 1996. A coordinated campaign, involving the local union and other civil society groups and campaign organizations in the U.S. and Canada, resulted in the re-hiring of workers fired for attempting to organize a union and the establishment of the Independent Monitoring Group in El Salvador (GMIES). Additional triumphs have surfaced in Guatemala where Liz Claibourne conceded to monitoring; and the victory in Puebla, Mexico where, for the first time, the local contractor was ready to sign with the workers and where a collective bargaining agreement took place. The speaker also mentioned that we must hold governments accountable in enforcing laws on behalf of workers.

Working Groups

Working groups were asked to address the following questions:

1. strategies at level of workers, firms, government.
2. partnerships and alliances, what would people like to see?
3. research to back solidarity action
4. what do all the concentric circles, addressed in Gareffi presentation, mean for workers and what is the net impact on workers.

The points raised by the three groups overlapped:

Group 1

Questions:

- What type of organizing would be effective for garment workers locally and transnationally?
- How will we continue?

Goals (identifying needs, research, organizing)

- (1) Increase transnational work
- (2) technology - consumer education
 - (a) worker training
 - (b) equipment (computers, cameras, training, literacy)
- (3) women empowerment in labor and union organizing → training, organizations
- (4) Broaden coalition/alliances - include other groups, such as a global directory of resources for garment workers (networking: Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic - need asian groups)
 - (a) monitoring
 - (b) women's groups
 - (c) labor organizations
 - (d) human rights organization
 - (e) advocates
- (5) Reports/research - transnational research team
 - (a) conditions in each country
 - (b) corporation trail
 - (c) legal: tariffs, laws about wages
 - (d) organizing
 - (e) documenting successes and failures
 - (f) monitoring
 - (g) practices
- (6) Information dissemination, the materials that are for workers, organizers
- (7) Consumer-worker connections

Group 2

- Linking workers internationally
- More pressure on consumer market
- Organizing internationally
- Look at homework, including Los Angeles/Tijuana link
- Look at labor laws and employers roles as defined by labor laws
- Mapping and linking emerging organizing entities, including but not exclusive to unions
- Globalization - need for research, in terms of what the industry will look like and the need to build
- international movements and who that would be, how will firms change?
- Assumptions, jobs will be lost, so what type of jobs will be created?
- Public opinion - consumers
- When one gets public attention, what does one tell the public to do that will really help in the long term?

- Mapping the different forms of unionization efforts, how many emerging organizational efforts are taking place?
- Compare studies of labor laws
- Does international organizing make sense?

Group 3

- Participation of all subjects involved: workers, policy makers, researchers, etcetera
- How to create solidarity among workers regardless of differences in wages among them
- Making use of the already existing networks
- Create a different definition for the code of conduct, should instead be called the code of obligations
- Academic research fully integrated and understandable to the general public, and the workers should identify the research – don't do for the workers what they can do for themselves

Final Discussion

We concluded with a deliberation on whether those in attendance desired to continue this dialogue, and if so, how? What would be the appropriate next step and what questions would be raised? The following section contains the strategies and activities identified by the attendees:

Working across borders: Exploring the possibility of working at the international level, and building relationships with colleagues abroad, could conceivably lead to mobilization, such as an international retailer campaign. This intention to work across borders does not, of course, minimize the importance, for the workers and their direct service providers, of remaining active at the local level.

International Labour Office Conference: The garment workers can take part in the upcoming ILO conference in Geneva. We need to look into whether the organizations need credentials and if funding is available.

Research: the attendees voiced interest in building relationships with researchers for the purpose of obtaining data and advancing their campaigns.

Global convening can be overwhelming. Therefore, future collaborators should focus narrowly on specific issues as they address garment workers' national and international needs. A suggestion for a possible joint effort across borders was an international summit on the living wage.

Participants found it helpful to meet others doing the same work elsewhere, but most concurred that more time was needed together and, in particular, more time was needed for working group discussions.

Questions and Comments by the Attendees:

- How will globalization further restructure the garment industry, and what will the industry look like in the near future? We must understand the industry more than we do now and not rely on generalizations.
- Who will be our allies?
- What types of jobs will workers be left with when this industry moves from their respective countries?
- Given that 45% of the industry is still in the U.S., what keeps the industry here? To know that is to know how to strategize.
- A problem is that low-skill workers are not trained to move up (or out?), and have low native and English language skills. So, what emphasis should be placed on human capital development?
- What is the role of government in development strategies?

Analysis

First and foremost, we need to understand the underlying economic trends: economic restructuring, the new economic global reordering of the last 20 years or so, NAFTA and parallel entities (e.g., Plan Puebla Panamá), along with the implications for the garment industry. For example, we should know the connection between human trafficking and economic restructuring and informal economy.

Familiarity with all the actors in the various countries would facilitate a greater understanding of what each entity is doing as well as what each should be doing. The entities/actors include: 1) the workers themselves, 2) the employers and managers at the sites of production; 3) department stores/outlets, locations of consumption; 4) clothing manufacturers; 5) the state; 6) consumers; 7) direct service providers and advocates on

behalf of workers; 8) international organizations; and 9) international governing entities (e.g., the UN, international courts).

Among the multiple strategies possible is to have the UCSC Summer Institute devote one summer to focusing entirely and exclusively on the garment industry, bringing together activist workers, direct service providers, and academic researchers who work in the garment arena. During that ten-day interval, these individuals would learn from one another, strategize and set goals for an international mobilization effort.

Along these lines, the collaboration with international teams of university researchers should consist of not only research experts on the apparel industry, but also academics conducting related research in fields such as economic development, informal economy and social movements. This diversity among the researchers will allow for a more comprehensive examination of the issue at hand within the larger context.

The next step is up to conference attendees. Uniting workers across borders and developing multinational organizational efforts remains quite a formidable yet worthwhile challenge.
