

What to do about 'Sweatshop'

What Herald Examiner staff writer Merle Linda Wolin's "Sweatshop" expose has revealed (aside from sometimes inexcusable working conditions in the Los Angeles garment industry and the seeming governmental impotence in improving them) is one incontestable fact:

Just as it took an awful lot of people to get the garment industry into the state of decay it is in, it is going to take an awful lot of people to get it out of trouble.

Cleaning up our sweatshops will require that everyone — citizen groups, government agencies and especially the industry itself — pitch in as a team and help.

The first step? Our politicians probably ought to press for national legislation. While the Herald Examiner has been no great fan of federal intervention, believing instead that state governments are generally far better equipped to handle local problems, we do admit that some problems (e.g., welfare) transcend state boundaries and therefore the competency of the state to solve. This may be one of them.

Without national legislation, a California clean-up could wind up penalizing California. We must be aware of the possible domino effect of making California laws tougher than our neighbors'. Therefore, a uniform federal law allowing closer regulation and holding manufacturers accountable for working conditions would protect our state economy from a mass flight to friendlier legal climates by disgruntled manufacturers.

Nevertheless, our state agencies have not performed adequately, whether because of inefficiency, lack of resources, lack of interest or lack of appropriate jurisdiction. In California, our enforcement agencies must begin a stricter program of inspection and enforcement of violations. It is true that they are strapped by a lack of resources, but we insist that there is plenty of room to manage the

resources they have more effectively.

And, to be sure, our courts must realize that white-collar crime can be terribly damaging to the victim. Surely this is all too often the case in our garment industry. The courts should act on that understanding by levying stiffer penalties for violators. Too often the exploiters go away nearly scot-free. Shattered human dignity must be worth more than a simply paid fine. Checkbook justice simply will not do any more. Would a day or two in jail force violators to think more seriously about the impact of their crime on human lives? A little judicial harshness might be worth trying, at least temporarily, as a demonstration of L.A.'s concern for the garment worker.

And, certainly, the media can and should continue to keep these violations and abominations in the public conscience. Laxity and indifference towards exploitation of the working poor must not be tolerated. The media, in a responsible way, must report the industry's failings, not just the triumphs of its latest fall line or string bikinis.

Finally, and most importantly, the public must continue to care. We have received a flood of heartwarming calls and letters — many more than we have been able to print in our Letters to the Editor column. Readers have expressed both praise for our "Sweatshop" series and shock at the failure of appropriate government agencies to better police the industry. Perhaps citizen groups might volunteer to help short-staffed agencies in their policing of sweatshops, or organize boycotts of manufacturers who consistently disregard their workers' conditions.

Only with the public's support and interest can Los Angeles feel entirely proud about this industry, which is a terribly important part of our economy, our glamour and our sense of self. We wish it had not been necessary to run this series. But, as you have seen, it was. ■