

# maquila network update

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## Will Mexican democracy include workers?

**O**n August 14, over 250 maquila workers, labour rights activists, and leaders of Mexico's democratic labour movement gathered in Reynosa, Mexico to shine a spotlight on increasing attacks against the right of Mexican workers to form and join unions of their choice and democratically elect their union leaders.

The International Forum for Freedom of Association was addressed by representatives of the tri-national Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), the Mexican National Workers Union (UNT), and the Mexican Committee for Free Association. Speakers denounced recent acts of intimidation against maquila



*Duro workers demand justice during Governor Yarrington's visit.*

workers and their local support groups, and accusations of "terrorism" made against US and Canadian labour and solidarity organizations.

Workers from the Duro Bag manufacturing factory in Rio Bravo and Custom Trim and Auto Trim factories in Matamoros and Valle Hermoso gave testimonies on the threats, harassment and

police violence they have suffered for exercising their democratic rights, and for filing a complaint under the NAFTA labour side agreement.

During Mexican president-elect Vicente Fox's August 22 visit to Toronto, the MSN presented Fox with detailed information on labour rights violations that have occurred in the Mexico's northern

maquila region in the past three months, urging him to investigate the situation and make good on his election pledge to ensure that freedom of association is respected.

### Duro Struggle Continues

On June 18, police attacked striking workers at the Duro bag factory in Rio Bravo, threatening them with pistols and automatic rifles, beating a number of the workers, and arresting their leaders. Duro workers make shopping bags and gift bags for US companies, including Hallmark.

A solidarity campaign coordinated by the CJM, secured the release of the arrested strike leaders, but Duro management has so far refused to allow over 100 workers to return to their jobs. For almost two months, state government officials blocked the workers' request for the registration of their independent union.

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# Duro Struggle Continues

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Faced with growing national and international pressure, including letters from many MSN members, at the end of June, the Governor of the state of Tamaulipas made a verbal agreement with the leader of the UNT to ensure that the workers could return to their jobs without reprisals and be granted their union registration.

A month and a half later, on August 11, Duro workers staged protests during a visit by Governor Yarrington to the area, with placards and banners demanding justice. Meanwhile, their elected leader, Eliud

Almaguer, was meeting with the labour department in the state capital of Ciudad Victoria, where he was finally granted the registration for an independent union.

However, at the time of this writing, locked-out Duro workers have not yet been allowed to return to work. They continue to be camped out in the town's main public square, exposed to the hot sun. On July 31, the eight year old son of one of the workers died, at least in part because the company had cut off the family's health insurance, and they couldn't afford private care.

If and when Duro workers are reinstated, they still face the

difficult challenge of winning an in-plant representation election to determine whether they will be represented by the independent union or the government-dominated and employer-friendly Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM).

## Custom Trim Workers Threatened

On June 30, current and former workers at Breed Technologies' Custom Trim/Auto Trim plants in Matamoros and Valle Hermoso joined with labour, religious and worker rights organizations in Mexico, the

US and Canada (the MSN) in submitting a complaint under the NAFTA labour side agreement, charging the Mexican government with failing to enforce its health and safety legislation at the two plants.

On July 19, three workers were interviewed about the complaint on a Matamoros television program. That same day, two of the workers were interrogated by management personnel in front of a special meeting for all employees called by the company.

On three occasions, the wife of one of the former employees who had signed the complaint was visited at her workplace by three large, unidentified men, inquiring

about her husband. They told her they knew her husband was working with Manuel Mondragon, whom they called an agitator.

(Mondragon is a local leader of the Catholic Young Workers Ministry (PJO).) They offered her money to reveal where Mondragon lived, and asked if she wasn't afraid about what could happen. On the third visit, they grabbed her purse and tore up her pay cheque, threatening her with "hunger" if she talked. She has since received death threats.

In numerous newspaper reports, representatives of the CTM accused US and Canadian unions of carrying out a "dirty war" against the establishment of new maquila factories in Mexico. CJM executive director Martha Ojeda was accused of being a "destabilizer" working with "professional agitators," and was threatened with arrest.

CTM officials also informed eight workers who had spoken to the media about the NAO complaint that they would be fired.

At a moment when governments and the international media are applauding Mexico for its relatively democratic elections, Mexican democracy does not yet include Mexican workers. Even lodging a complaint under the virtually unenforceable NAFTA labour side agreement is becoming a dangerous and "subversive" act for Mexican workers.

## maquila network update

is published quarterly in English and Spanish by the Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN). The MSN includes over 400 organizations and individuals across Canada. The MSN promotes solidarity between Canadian labour, women's and social movement groups and Mexican, Central American and Asian counterparts organizing to raise standards and improve conditions in maquiladora and export processing zones. The MSN acts as the secretariat for the Labour Behind the Label Coalition and the Ethical Trading Action Group and is active in Stop Sweatshops campaigning.

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*Sweatshop award ceremony judges try to present trophy to Wal-Mart.*

# Wal-Mart caught buying from Burma, again.

When the first nomination form arrived on his desk, Wal-Mart Canada's director of public affairs, Andrew Pelletier, probably knew it was going to be a bad week. Hundreds more nomination forms followed from people across Canada, each one nominating Wal-Mart Canada as the "Sweatshop Retailer of the Year." This was more than your everyday customer complaint.

For months the Ethical Trading Action Group (ETAG) had been writing to Wal-Mart about its garment imports from Burma, a country ruled by one of the world's most notorious violators of human and worker rights.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has condemned Burma for its

persistent use of forced labour, and the Canadian government has urged companies not to do business with Burma. With industrial wages as low as US 4¢ an hour, Burma offers companies like Wal-Mart possibly the cheapest labour in the world.

In February, the Retail Council of Canada had assured ETAG that Wal-Mart was no longer sourcing from Burma. But Wal-Mart didn't respond to numerous letters from the MSN (ETAG's secretariat) requesting conformation.

That is until Canadians started sending in the nomination forms. On June 9, Pelletier called the MSN office, demanding an explanation and assuring us that Wal-Mart was no longer buying from what he claimed was his company's only Burmese supplier.

According to Pelletier, Wal-Mart had no plans to buy from Burma in the future. Would they put that in writing? No. Would they promise not to source from Burma until the human rights situation improved? No. The corporate giant had blinked, but wouldn't budge.

## Distinguished Retailer?

On June 19, Stop Sweatshops activists gathered outside the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, where the Retail Council was honouring Wal-Mart Canada's president, Dave Ferguson as the "Distinguished Canadian Retailer of the Year."

The MSN, the Canadian Friends of Burma, the Council of Canadian, the Canadian Labour Congress, Ten Days for Global Justice, and the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees were staging an alternative awards ceremony where Wal-Mart was crowned the Sweatshop Retailer of the Year.

## Strike Two

In July, the MSN and the Friends of Burma received new information showing that Wal-Mart Canada had increased its sourcing from Burma over the previous six-month period. The purchases were from four new Burmese companies.

One of the companies, Ever Green Overseas Enterprise Group, is owned by Lo Hsing-han, an infamous Burmese drug trafficker, who claims he is no longer in the narcotics business.

According to Corinne Baumgarten of Canadian Friends of Burma, the Burmese regime protects drug lords such as Lo Hsing-han and openly allows profits from the drug trade to be channeled into private enterprises.

In July 15 article in the *Globe and Mail*, Pelletier was quoted as saying that his company's new imports from Burma were from old orders made before January 11. "We have no new order dates after May," he promised.

## Strike Three

In August, the MSN received new information showing that Wal-Mart was still importing clothes from Burma in June. Made in Myanmar clothes continue to be sold in Wal-Mart stores across Canada.

Stop Sweatshops supporters are continuing to demand that Wal-Mart put its policy on Burma in writing, and pledge to cease having products made in Burma until the human rights situation improves in that country.

Meanwhile, community activists across North America are mounting local campaigns to keep Wal-Mart stores out of their towns and preserve downtown business centres.

In Cobourg, Ontario, community activists recently invited the MSN to speak at a public meeting about Wal-Mart's sourcing practices internationally and their labour practices in North America.

# MSN launches 'No Sweat' campaign

In the spring of 1999, students and faculty at the University of Toronto successfully pushed their school to adopt a code of conduct for manufacturers of products bearing the U of T name. The code requires manufacturers to respect basic labour standards like the right to free association, prohibitions on child and forced labour, and health and safety standards.

The achievement of a code for licensed products at the University of Toronto opens up new possibilities for Canadian campaigns promoting "No Sweat" licensing, purchasing and procurement policies for public institutions, membership organizations and governments. By requiring compliance with basic labour standards and full disclosure of factory locations from a significant number of companies who sell products to these institutions and organizations, these "No Sweat" campaigns could

move more companies to improve working conditions and further isolate companies that refuse to change.

Effective "No Sweat" campaigns could open the door for sweeping changes in the way apparel is manufactured - from abusive workplace conditions hidden behind closed doors to respectful, fair conditions open to public scrutiny.

As students at the University of Toronto have demonstrated, we have the ability to influence the industry through the institutions we are a part of.



## Starting your own 'No Sweat' Campaign

- If you're a high school student or teacher, consider starting a campaign for a high school or school board policy on school and sports uniforms.
- If you're a union member, consider starting a campaign for a policy governing uniform and other apparel purchases by your employer.
- If you're a member of another large organization, consider starting a campaign for a purchasing policy governing hats, jackets, shirts and other apparel purchases by your group.
- Any citizen can start a campaign to change government policy. Organize a campaign to convince your city council to adopt a "No Sweat" procurement policy for city worker uniforms and other apparel. Join with others to promote a similar policy at the provincial level. Or join us in lobbying the Federal government to require disclosure of factory locations in much the same way they now require companies to file other business information.

## No Sweat Organizer's Action Guide

The Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN) has developed this guide to help you start your own "No Sweat" campaign. It is full of ideas for practical actions you can take to promote ethical purchasing policies. Please get in touch with us to find out how you can get a copy of MSN's new "No-Sweat" Organizer's Action Guide.

**Who is the best to start?**  
The best to start for students, union members, and all Canadian citizens who are looking for ways to stop sweatshop abuses. It's full of ideas for actions you can take to contribute effectively to stopping sweatshop abuses.

**STUDENTS AGAINST SWEATSHOPS**



## What is the "No Sweat" Organizer's Guide?

The Maquila Solidarity Network is producing a new action guide for students, teachers, union members, and all Canadian citizens who want to help stop sweatshop abuses. It's full of ideas for practical actions you can take to promote ethical purchasing policies. Please get in touch with us to find out how you can get a copy of MSN's new "No-Sweat" Organizer's Action Guide.

## Getting Started on a High School "No Sweat" Campaign

There are three basic steps to getting started.

**1 Research:** Find out what uniforms are bulk purchased at your school. Check the labels on the uniforms and record the names of the companies that make them, and the countries where they are made. Then find out who's responsible for your school's purchasing policy. (Usually the school board sets policy, but schools decide on purchases.)

**2 Organizing a "No Sweat" Group:** Getting a student group started is easy. Students at some schools have organized a lunch-time talk on sweatshops. With the help of your teachers, you could also arrange in-class presentations, or even a school assembly with a video and speaker. At your event, pass around a sign-up sheet. Phone students on the list and organize a meeting.

**3 Lobbying your School Board:** Ask other student and teacher organizations to endorse your campaign – student council, teacher and support staff unions, student clubs, parent groups. Circulate a petition addressed to your school board calling for an ethical purchasing policy. Arrange to present a brief to the school board.



# news & notes

## UNITE Launches Class Action Suit

On June 19, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) launched a \$1.5 million class action suit against three retailers, two Metro Toronto manufacturers and a local contractor. Named in the suit are two major US-based apparel retailers and manufacturers Venator (formerly Woolworth) and J. Crew. The suit was launched on behalf of Toronto homeworkers who sewed clothes for a contractor working for the companies. It alleges that the companies are jointly liable for violations of the Ontario Employment Standards Act, and that they owe the workers wages, overtime premiums and vacation pay. Fan Jin Lian, the representative plaintiff in the case says she had to work up to seven days a week, 15 hours a day to meet company deadlines. Between September 23, 1999 and November 24, 1999, she was only paid \$675, and is owed approximately \$5,000. UNITE claims that prices set by retailers and manufacturers are so low and production deadlines so tight, that Fan sometimes didn't earn the minimum wage for homeworkers. Fan is a member of the Homeworkers Association, a project of the UNITE Ontario Council.

## Chentex Workers Fight to Keep Union

Workers at the Chentex maquila garment factory in Nicaragua's Las Mercedes Free Trade Zone are in the fight of their lives to keep their union and their jobs. According to Pedro Ortega, general secretary of the garment workers federation, Taiwanese maquila owners,

with the cooperation of the Nicaraguan government, are engaged in an anti-union terror campaign to rid their factories of union supporters. Chentex management has fired workers considered friendly to the union and has brought criminal charges against union leaders. Chentex produces jeans for major US retailers, including Kohl's, J.C. Penny, Kmart and Wal-Mart. On August 16, a delegation of US religious leaders, including Detroit Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, who were visiting Nicaragua to investigate labour practices at Chentex and other maquilas, were expelled from the country. The government justified its action by claiming it couldn't permit people entering the country as tourists to engage in "political" activity. However, according to the US National Labor Committee, US delegations and an international solidarity campaign are having a positive impact. On August 30, the Nicaraguan courts accepted the union's request to stop criminal proceedings against union leaders in order to give workers and local NGOs an opportunity to present expert testimony that this is a labour conflict and not a criminal case.

## Guatemalan Banana Conflict Drags On

As of August 1, 900 Guatemalan banana workers who were illegally fired in September 1999 by a subsidiary of Del Monte were still not back to work, in spite of an agreement reached between the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) and Del Monte Fresh Produce. The illegal firings were followed in October 1999 by an armed attack on strike leaders by local thugs who forced them at gunpoint to resign as the executive of the SITRABI union and flee

for their lives. While some progress is being made in implementing the IUF agreement, including the removal from Del Monte operations of the leaders of the October attack, union leaders and their families are still living in a government "safe house" near Guatemala City. National banana producers and SITRABI have been unable to reach a first contract for the three plantations involved in the agreement.

## Indian Child Labourers Demand Action

On June 17, about 250 former child labourers gathered at the mausoleum of Indian hero Mahatma Gandhi to demand action against the exploitation of children. The children collected signatures to a petition calling for an end to child labour. A recent survey conducted by the International Labour Organization estimates that of the 250 million working children worldwide, at least 60 million are in India.

## Ontario Ups Working Hours

The Ontario Conservative government has tabled proposed changes to the provincial Employment Standards Act that would allow employers to demand that employees work 60 hours a week, up from the current 48-hour limit. And that's not all. Hours could be averaged over a three-week period so that an employer could require workers to work 20 hours one week, 40 hours the next week and 70 hours the third week without paying any overtime in the third week. In addition, the government is proposing removing current require-

ments of a substitute day off for working a public holiday, and allowing vacation time to be taken as individual days. While the Ontario government claims its proposals "offer flexibility to employees," they would in fact provide a "flexible" workforce to employers and legalize current sweatshop practices in the growing underground economy.



### Who Wants to be a Sweatshop Millionaire?

US morning talk show host Regis Philbin joins his co-host Kathie Lee Gifford in putting his name to a line of clothing manufactured by a company with a history of labour rights violations. In June, Philbin launched his new shirt and tie line under the name "Regis by the Van Heusen Company." In 1998, Phillips-Van Heusen closed down the only unionized maquila in Guatemala and shifted its sewing to non-union contractors.

### Indonesian Workers Fired for Standing Up to Sony

On April 26, workers walked out of a Sony television and stereo production plant in Jakarta. The strikers were demanding that they be able to sit while they work, but the electronics company's newly introduced production line requires them to stand throughout their entire workday. In July, the company received approval from the government to terminate the contracts of 928 of the plant's 1,500 workers. Sony claims the firings are justified because "the dispute had proven impossible to resolve."

### The Swoosh Down Under

The spotlight is on Nike yet again as the sportswear giant's swoosh logo is splashed across the uniforms of athletes competing at the Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. The Fairwear Coalition, the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA), Community Aid Abroad (Oxfam Australia), and the Australian National Union of Students are teaming up to pressuring Nike to sign onto the Homeworker Code of Practice and to accept genuinely independent monitoring of the labour practices of its overseas suppliers. On June 6, Nike settled a lawsuit launched by the TCFUA, accusing the company of failing to provide Australian homeworkers the legal minimum wage and benefits for this sector of garment workers. The company still refuses to sign onto the Homeworker Code, claiming that it already has its own code, and doesn't permit homework.

### US Sweatshop Workers Win Settlement, with Student Support

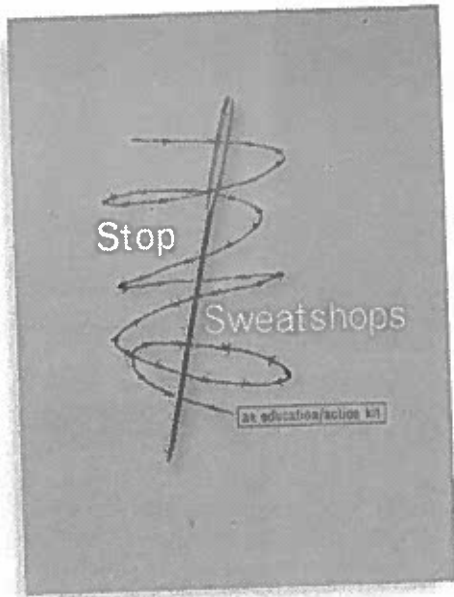
With the support of Student Against Sweatshops groups at a number of US universities, eight garment workers who sewed university jackets at a Los Angeles sweatshop have won a \$172,000 settlement, including back wages and compensation for the fired workers. "Student organizing and public support for the workers played a key role in helping us settle the case relatively quickly," said Muneer Ahmad, a lawyer representing the workers. A lawsuit filed against J.H. Design Group alleged that the company required workers to work 10-12 hour days, seven days a week for less than the minimum wage, often without overtime pay. Workers report being subjected to verbal abuse and racial slurs. They say they were forced to complete quotas by sewing in their homes until midnight and on weekend. Workers who spoke out about the sweatshop abuses were fired. According to Nikki Bas, director of Sweatshop Watch, "This is the first victory for sweatshop workers who used university codes of conduct as tools to demand justice."

### resources

new

**Made in Thailand, 30 min.,** a video about women's union organizing in Thailand and the Kader Toy Factory fire, directed by Eve-Laure Moros Ortega. Contact: [evelaure@mindspring.com](mailto:evelaure@mindspring.com)

# New from the MSN



## Stop Sweatshops: An Education / Action Kit

The Maquila Solidarity Network presents a brand new education/ action kit for teachers, students, union members and church groups interested in getting involved in campaigns to Stop Sweatshops. The most up-to-date and comprehensive kit available includes:

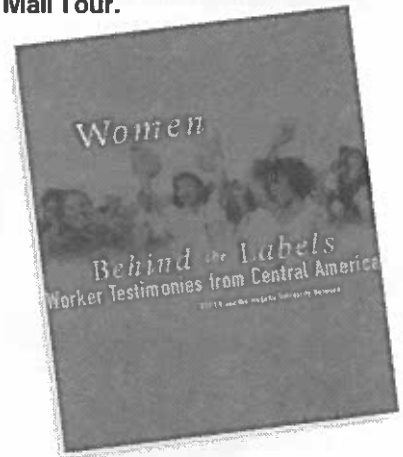
- a special educator's guide to designing anti-sweatshop workshops and presentations;
- a step-by-step guide to corporate research;
- Issue sheets on the global garment industry, child labour, and codes of conduct and independent monitoring;
- Easy to use action tools, including how to organize a Sweatshop Fashion Show and a Sweatshop Mall Tour.

Price: \$12.50 (including postage)

## Women Behind the Labels: Worker Testimonies from Central America

The Maquila Solidarity Network and STITCH present a new collection of interviews with maquila and banana plantation workers in Central America. These interviews and pictures illustrate the real lives of the workers behind the headlines, the women who are organizing and campaigning for better wages and working conditions.

Price: \$5.00



**NEW!**

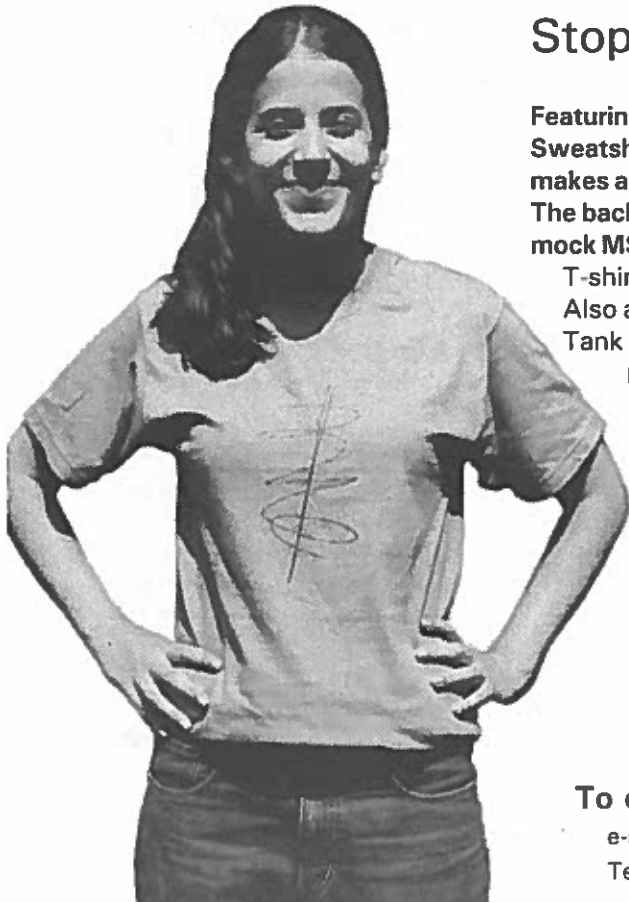
## Stop Sweatshops T-SHIRTS

Featuring the barbed-wire and needle design from the Stop Sweatshops kit, this union-made cotton t-shirt or tank top makes a dramatic point ... and looks good in the process! The back features the slogan "Stop Sweatshops" and a mock MSN 'label'.

T-shirt is available in S, M, L, in blue, khaki, and stone.  
Also available in M and L, in orange.

Tank tops are available in S, M, L, in light grey.

Price: \$15.00

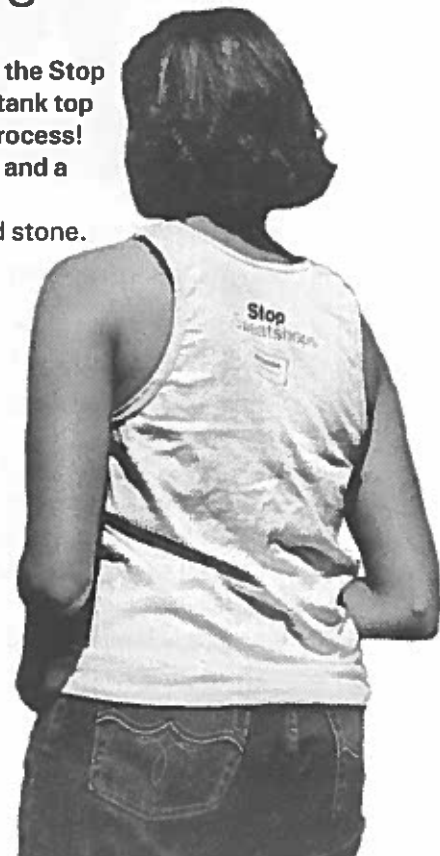


FRONT

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BACK



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