

# Slaves to Fashion



# **Slaves to Fashion**

Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops

**Robert J. S. Ross**



The University of Michigan Press  
*Ann Arbor*

Copyright © by the University of Michigan 2004  
All rights reserved

Published in the United States of America by  
The University of Michigan Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

© Printed on acid-free and 50% post-consumer waste paper

2007 2006 2005 2004 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,  
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise,  
without the written permission of the publisher.

*A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ross, Robert J. S., 1943–

Slaves to fashion : poverty and abuse in the new sweatshops /  
Robert J. S. Ross.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-472-10941-3 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-472-03022-1  
(cloth : alk. paper)

1. Sweatshops. 2. Clothing workers. 3. Clothing trade—Corrupt  
practices. I. Title.

HD2337.R67 2004

331.25—dc22

2004004960

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publisher for  
permission to reprint previously published material: HarperCollins  
Publishers Inc. for “Shirt,” from *The Want Bone* by Robert Pinsky  
(New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991). Copyright © 1991 by  
Robert Pinsky. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins  
Publishers, Inc.

# Shirt

by Robert Pinsky

The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,  
The nearly invisible stitches along the collar  
Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians

Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break  
Or talking money or politics while one fitted  
This armpiece with its overseam to the band

Of cuff I button at my wrist. The presser, the cutter,  
The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,  
The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The infamous blaze

At the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven.  
One hundred and forty-six died in the flames  
On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes—

The witness in a building across the street  
Who watched how a young man helped a girl to step  
Up to the windowsill, then held her out

Away from the masonry wall and let her drop.  
And then another. As if he were helping them up  
To enter a streetcar, and not eternity.

A third before he dropped her put her arms  
Around his neck and kissed him. Then he held  
Her into space, and dropped her. Almost at once

He stepped up to the sill himself, his jacket flared  
And fluttered up from his shirt as he came down,  
Air filling up the legs of his gray trousers—

Like Hart Crane's Bedlamite, "shrill shirt ballooning."  
Wonderful how the pattern matches perfectly  
Across the placket and over the twin bar-tacked

Corners of both pockets, like a strict rhyme  
Or a major chord. Prints, plaids, checks,  
Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras. The clan tartans

Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian,  
To control their savage Scottish workers, tamed  
By a fabricated heraldry: MacGregor,

Bailey, MacMartin. The kilt, devised for workers  
to wear among the dusty clattering looms.  
Weavers, carders, spinners. The loader,

The docker, the navy. The planter, the picker, the sorter  
Sweating at her machine in a litter of cotton  
As slaves in calico headrags sweated in fields:

George Herbert, your descendant is a Black  
Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma  
And she inspected my shirt. Its color and fit

And feel and its clean smell have satisfied  
both her and me. We have culled its cost and quality  
Down to the buttons of simulated bone,

The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters  
Printed in black on neckband and tail. The shape,  
The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt.

# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
<b>Introduction:</b> Sweatshops Are Where Hearts Starve	1
<b>Part 1. The Fall and Rise of Sweatshops in the United States</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 1.</b> What Is a Sweatshop?	9
<b>Appendix 1.</b> Estimating the Number of Sweatshop Workers in the United States in 2000	42
<b>Chapter 2.</b> Memory of Strike and Fire	52
<b>Chapter 3.</b> The Decline of Sweatshops in the United States	72
<b>Chapter 4.</b> The Era of Decency and the Return of the Sweatshop	86
<b>Part 2. Explaining the Rise of the New Sweatshops</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Chapter 5.</b> Global Capitalism and the Race to the Bottom in the Production of Our Clothes	103
<b>Chapter 6.</b> Retail Chains: The Eight-Hundred-Pound Gorillas of the World Trade in Clothing	125

## Contents

<b>Chapter 7.</b> Firing Guard Dogs and Hiring Foxes	147
<b>Chapter 8.</b> Immigrants and Imports	172
<b>Chapter 9.</b> Union Busting and the Global Runaway Shop	187
<b>Chapter 10.</b> Framing Immigrants, Humiliating Big Shots: Mass Media and the Sweatshop Issue	206
<b>Appendix 2.</b> Details of the Immigrant Blame Analysis	239
<b>Conclusion to Part 2:</b> Producing Sweatshops in the United States	243
<b>Part 3. Movements and Policies</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Chapter 11.</b> Combating Sweatshops from the Grass Roots	249
<b>Chapter 12.</b> Solidarity North and South: Reframing International Labor Rights	284
<b>Chapter 13.</b> Ascending a Ladder of Effective Antisweatshop Policy	309
<b>Chapter 14.</b> Three Pillars of Decency	322
<b>Personal Epilogue:</b> Hearts Starve	335
Notes	339
References	352
Index	377

## Acknowledgments

This project began during one sabbatical leave and was substantially finished during another. Clark University granted the sabbatical, and a Clark faculty development grant helped me comb the files at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations library. I am grateful, but in truth the work was accomplished despite the duties I have gladly shouldered at Clark University.

The librarians are another matter. Mary Hartman, Ed McDermott, and Irene Walch of the Robert Goddard Library responded to every inquiry and tracked down each article or book—and did it with humor. Professors are often well served by librarians but have rare occasions to say so. This is mine. The small-town librarians in Southborough, Massachusetts, also have big hearts: to Judy Williams, Peggy Tuttle, Clare Curran-Ball, and Heidi Lindsey—hats off!

When I chose it during my first sabbatical, the topic of garment industry labor abuse arose from a series of speaking and conference engagements. This topic was the one that united heart and intellect. The heart part was an act of filial loyalty: my father, Irving Barrett, was a garment cutter, a member of Local 10 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and his father had been an early organizer of the union. After my father's death, my father-in-law, Ben Levenson, became a kind, wise,

## Acknowledgments

and loving father figure. It is to these two men who volunteered their care for me that I dedicate this book.

Numerous colleagues and informants ease the way of works like this. Those who I leave out will, I hope, forgive the protracted nature of the project. Prof. Altgracia Ortiz led me to her work and that of other Puerto Rican colleagues to help me in my first try at understanding the Puerto Rican role in New York's garment industry. Ellen McCormack, an undergraduate student at Clark and now a faculty member at Wellesley College, collaborated with me, as did Ellen Rosen, on our first sweatshop paper in 1995. Rich Appelbaum and Chris Chase-Dunn have given me opportunities to set my thoughts out in talks and on paper, as have Jim Russell, Richard Peet, Jerry Lembcke, Gary Gereffi, Arno Tausch, and Gernot Kohler.

Apo Leong of the Asia Monitor Resource Center facilitated a trip to Beijing that induced an important writing project that my new collaborator, Anita Chan, and I have accomplished. I am indebted to them both. The Ford Foundation paid for a trip that made all that possible. Monina Wong of the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Commission showed me the scene in Shenzhen and Guangdong.

Edna Bonacich showed grace under pressure when, as she generously showed me around the Los Angeles garment district, she coolly talked down an overheated street person. She and Rich Appelbaum wrote a great book on Los Angeles's garment industry that inspired me to labor on. Jeff Hermanson entertained my questions from the Workers Justice Center in New York and by e-mail from his AFL-CIO office in Mexico City. Ginny Coughlin of UNITE kindly answered questions and paid for lunch. Carl Proper opened his files and lent me his desk at ILGWU headquarters. Ann Hoffman of UNITE's Washington office was interesting on and off the record. Jerry Fishbein, then of UNITE, showed me my first sweatshop—its picture is in this book—and Alan Howard was helpful and encouraging.

One Monday afternoon in July 2000 Charlie Kernaghan called me and barked, "Bob, I want you come to Managua with me . . . on Wednesday." I took a leap of faith, paid for the ticket, and haven't regretted it for a moment. Barbara Briggs, Kernaghan's associate at the National Labor

## Acknowledgments

Committee, was willing coolly to inform me of the politics of things I did not understand. She is one of this world's unheralded but true heroes.

Herb Spivack gave me insight to U.S. brand names' relations with their Chinese contractor counterparts: and he gets to fly first class.

The Executive Committee of the Greek Federation of Textile Workers answered my questions for an hour, and I learned three different parties' views of the idea of a social clause. Rick Van den Braber taught me about the Clean Clothes Campaign in Amsterdam—among the many charms of that city. Peter Liebhold of the Smithsonian was an attentive listener and a good teacher and had great files. Nancy Green told me where to go in Paris garment districts and where to have a really nice meal I could afford. Her book was a source of vital information. The staff of the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at Cornell University helped me find transcripts of Frances Perkins's talks to her students; Hope Nisely helped me locate photographs. Numerous people at the Department of Labor's Office of Public Affairs and Wage and Hour Division office facilitated my research.

Summer interns of the International Studies Stream at Clark University, Kendra Fehrer, Johann Walczak, and Adam Tomczik produced meticulously documented drafts of the Kukdong and BJ&B cases.

Peter Dreier commented on the first draft manuscript in exquisite and sometimes painful detail. I took almost all of his advice.

When one labors in obscurity, the helping hand of people who publicize one's work is welcome and often decisive. Clark's former director of communications, Kate Chesley, liked the idea of sweatshop research and publicized my first few papers. Tim Boulay, associate director for media relations, did likewise. The upshot was that Ellen McCarthy, an editor at the University of Michigan Press, took notice and approached me about writing this book. I appreciate all of this attention and initiative. Ellen stayed with me through many delays as civic responsibilities and faculty leadership competed for my time.

Marion Levenson Ross continued to respond to drafts and ideas long after the novelty wore off: when I count blessings she is the first. Rachel I. Ross brings the right books to my attention and a host of other good

## Acknowledgments

things. Gabriel M. B. Ross has a mission to have me read things of higher quality than I might otherwise devolve toward, and he expects me to run with him in each of his many cities. All of this is too much goodness to have been earned.

As I close this work, we come to the second year after the premature death of John O'Connor, organizer, environmentalist, former student, and philanthropist. Before it became a major public issue, John and his wife, Carolyn Mugar, understood the importance of the work I had begun on sweatshops in the apparel industry, and they helped me to get the research done. John was so happy about the work: he would playfully punch me on the arm and say, "Hey, we figured that one out, didn't we?" as news of the movement spread. Carolyn has my undying gratitude, and John's memory lives brightly in my heart.

It is well known that titles are more than titles. As the introduction to this book suggests, I lived with the title *Hearts Starve* for many years. Ellen McCarthy gently dissented, and Marion Ross did so more clearly. I thank them. When shove came to push I polled the troops and lost the vote. Then I picked up a voice mail message while white-water rafting in West Virginia: "Bob," said Suzanne Gordon, "Steve [Early] and I have been talking, and the title is *Slaves to Fashion*." She was right, and she wins my gratitude for caring and also a copy of the book.

There is a long line of women toilers behind this book. My father's mother, Molly, was the last sewing machine operator in our family; my mother, Marsha, taught small children how to read in school and taught her own children to stand up for themselves; her mother, Irene, took her own name, worked her whole life, and had a terrific sense of humor. My sister, Linda, has prevailed and has also brought me a lot of fun software. It is probable that somewhere in every family of American Jews there is someone whose life was touched by the rag trade. The era of sweatshops and immigration at the turn of the twentieth century is part of the lore of many other immigrant groups as well. It is a sadness that new groups of immigrant women—fighting for their families and struggling in their new lives—face conditions that have advanced so little since those days. They are our metaphorical grandparents, these strong women, and they deserve a whole world more than they get.