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Sweatshop Wages: Are the Jobs Worth the Sweat? The Real Choice is: Sweat or Starve? Or More Accurately: Sweat and Nearly Starve

Gil J. Villagran

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The real choice is: Sweat or Starve?

Or more accurately: Sweat and nearly Starve

A response by Gil Villagran, MSW
Lecturer, School of Social Work
gvillagran@casa.sjsu.edu
Premise:
“most sweatshops provide their workers an above average standard of living.”

(Sweatshops & Third World Living Standards, Are the Jobs Worth the Sweat? Powell & Skarbek, Introduction, p. 1)

How far above?

What is average?

Who’s standard of living?
“But any job is better than no job at all!”

True, however:

Making Apple I-pods
working 15 hours a day, 6 days a week
for $50 a week = $0.55/hour.

At Foxconn.inc. in Longhua, Hong Kong, and at another factory in Shanghai

Where most workers use half their wages to pay for housing and meals in the company dormitories.

15-hour workdays do not provide time to go home, cook their own meals, sleep in their own beds (if they have one).

This reduces their actual wages to $0.27 per hour

Source: SJ Mercury-News, 8-18-06, p. 3c
Hongfugin Industrial, a Taiwanese Corp. making Apple I-pods pays 1/4th the wage: $ 50 per month

At 15 hours/day, six days/week = $ .13/hr. But there is no report of abuse of workers being forced to stand at attention, as discipline, as reported at the Hong Kong factory.

Source: SJ Mercury-News, 8-18-06, p. 4D
How do workers work 15 hours/day, 6 days/wk.? 

If work hours are 6 am to 9 pm, workers may have to commute 1-2 hours each way, longer in some highly dense urban cities.

So workers must leave home before 5 am and return home after 10 pm.

Who cares for the babies and grandparents? When do workers actual *live* their family life?
But wages are not the whole story…

The compensation package for a worker could include stock options, healthcare, meals, training, a pension plan, advancement opportunities, housing, paid vacations, the corporate jet, etc.

Yes: for the corporate elite such as Allied Signal’s CEO Lawrence Bossidy who “earned” $12.4 million in the year that his workforce of 3,800 worked 48 hrs/wk, and had their pay cut from $1.30 to .82/hr. at its maquiladora in Monterrey, Mexico.

Source: NAFTA’s Corporate Con Artists, Sarah Anderson & Kristyne Peter, p.3
Non-monetary “fringe benefits” workers may get:

Workplace injuries, permanent disabilities due to lack of safety standards, non-enforcement, lack of safety equipment, lack of training

Toxic poisoning due to off-shore dumping of illegal chemicals

Death due to factory explosions (Union Carbide in Bopal, India)

Murder by police, corporate paramilitary, or military death squad murders of union organizers seeking to protect/organize workers (El Salvador, Burma, Nigeria, Honduras, Haiti, etc.)
“the mix of compensation is really driven by employee preference…not by the preferences of large firms and multinational corporations.”

In Reply to Sweatshop Sophistries: B. Powell, page 4

In the real world of third world unemployed and severely under-employed workers, their only preference is for any job at any wage and under any working conditions, in order to feed their families!!!

Unemployed workers desperate for a job do not have the ability to drive any preference!
“If we are concerned with the welfare of the citizens, however, the it is clearly not in those citizens’ interest to demand respect for all local labor laws. Some laws may help local labor, while other laws harm workers.”

In Reply to Sweatshop Sophistries: B. Powell, page 15 further on: “Some laws should be broken when it is in the interest of worker welfare to do so.”

This is a remarkable statement:

What labor laws harm workers?
Should the factory manager or owner decide which laws to follow?
Should the first world corporate CEO decide?

Should this attitude and practice apply in the U.S.?

It may already be the actual practice! (Enron, Exxon, Halliburton, etc.)
Hourly wages to keep the elite looking good

Nike in Vietnam $ .18 U.S. dollars
Mary Kate & Ashley in Bangladesh .08
Kathie Lee (Wal-Mart) in Honduras .31
Nike in Indonesia .14
   (this is 70% of basic needs for one person)

(Source: Sweatshops & Third World Living Standards, Powell, p.268)

Place yourself in these workers’ shoes, if they own shoes. What would be your preference?

Select your hell: work for Mary Kate, Kathy Lee, or Nike
The business of business is *not* business, (as Milton Friedman tell us)

but rather to **extract** the highest possible profit from the environment, the worker and the consumer,

to privatize profits for investors, while leaving the workers and society to sort out the consequences of devalued lives, and a destroyed environment.
“Capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men, for the nastiest of reasons, will somehow work for the benefit of us all.”

John Maynard Keynes
It does not have to be this way.
It must not be this way!

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed by all “developed” nations, recognizes that all humans have:

Article 23:
1. The right to work, …to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protections against unemployment.
2. The right to equal pay for equal work.
3. The right to just and favorable re-numeration ensuring an existence worthy of human dignity and supplemented, if necessary, by social protection.
4. The right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of one’s interests.
Article 24:

The right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25:

1. The right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of self and family.

1. The right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other circumstance beyond one’s control.

2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance.
Until all humans in all nations enjoy the *universal human right to* life-sustaining work with dignity, just re-numeration, and the fulfillment for a better life for all *our* children, it is unlikely that there will be a world without starvation, pandemics, economic chaos & refugees, terrorism, war, and environmental catastrophe.

G. Villagran