

LATE TESTIMONY

State of Hawaii

House Committee on Economic Development & Business Concerns

Hearing: Tuesday, January 29, 2008, 8:30 a.m.

HB2442 - Sweat-Free Public Procurement Policy

Eric Dirnbach
Apparel Industry Coordinator
UNITE HERE
212-332-9329
Edirnbach@unitehere.org

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I would like to submit these comments regarding the State of Hawaii's consideration of a sweat-free public procurement policy.

UNITE HERE represents over 450,000 workers in North America, including over 60,000 workers in the apparel and textile industries, and over 10,000 workers in the State of Hawaii. Our union has extensive experience with the labor conditions in the apparel industry in North America and in many countries around the world. We have represented apparel workers for over a century, going back to the struggle of the workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City, when on March 25, 1911, 146 workers died during a fire because their employer had locked the factory doors. Since this tragedy, we have worked to transform what were once poverty wage sweatshop jobs into decent employment for hundreds of thousands of workers.

However, despite these improvements, the last few decades have been disastrous for the domestic apparel industry, as large multinational corporations have closed factories in the U.S. and transferred this work overseas in search of cheaper labor and weaker regulations. In 1973, the U.S. clothing industry employed nearly 1.5 million workers. Since then, this number has fallen to about 200,000, a loss of well over 1 million apparel jobs.

As these jobs have been lost in the U.S., the global apparel industry is now one of the world's largest manufacturing industries, employing tens of millions of workers in dozens of developing countries. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these workers toil under sweatshop working conditions, many of them making clothing for the U.S. market. Their working conditions deteriorate as contractors compete for apparel work by lowering wages and requiring many hours of overtime work. The standard wages in most countries are at a poverty level and are typically less than half of what is needed to support an apparel worker's family. Workers are often forced to labor for 60 or 80 hours a week, with sometimes no days off for weeks or months. Child labor is not uncommon, workers have no access to health care, and the factories can be dangerous places to work. There is rarely any respect for workers' freedom of association and when workers try to form trade unions to improve their wages and working conditions, they are often fired, beaten, jailed or sometimes killed.

Workers in these countries need jobs, but they want and deserve much better wages and working conditions. They fight for better jobs under extremely difficult circumstances and they desperately need the help of apparel consumers. Buyers of apparel, whether individual or institutional, can stand in solidarity with these workers by demanding the truth about the sweatshop working conditions, holding employers accountable for the horrible employment situation they have created, and urging real and meaningful respect for workers rights.

U.S. cities, counties, and states purchase billions of dollars in uniforms and other apparel for their public employees, and many have enacted sweat-free purchasing policies over the past decade. By adopting a sweat-free procurement policy, the State of Hawaii can join other states such as Maine, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and California, who have all passed similar rules in the past few years.

The proposed policy, as outlined in HB2442, shows that Hawaii is committed to serious reform in their apparel procurement. The proposed policy includes provisions that are essential for proper enforcement of sweat-free purchasing. These include:

- Sweat-Free Code of Conduct – HB2442 includes very good labor standards, including a living wage for workers, a limit on weekly working hours, a prohibition on discrimination and harassment, and protection for workers freedom of association.
- Information Disclosure – HB2442 properly requires that production facilities disclose their names and locations. Sweatshops thrive under secrecy, and this disclosure will help ensure that bad working conditions cannot remain hidden.
- Sweat-Free Advisory Group – HB2442 establishes an advisory group that will assist the State in their enforcement of the policy.
- Independent Monitoring – HB2442 allows for independent monitoring of the production facilities. This is essential to determine if there violations of the policy.
- Enforcement – HB2442 has an appropriate process that can ensure that production facilities come into compliance with the policy, which includes the establishment of a remediation plan, and if necessary, sanctions and termination of the contract.

I would also urge the State of Hawaii to join the State and Local Government SweatFree Consortium (www.sweatfree.org/sweatfreeconsortium). The Consortium is a new joint effort of states and cities that have expressed concern about sweatshop conditions in the apparel industry. This is similar to the Workers Rights Consortium (www.workersrights.org), a collective effort of 178 colleges and universities that are committed to improving labor standards in factories that produce university-licensed apparel. In the SweatFree Consortium, cities and states will join together to set high standards for sweatfree procurement, share information about vendors and factories, and work on common enforcement, which will include independent monitoring of factories. Through collective effort, states and cities will have more power to ensure that the uniforms they purchase are made under decent working conditions.

Our union urges the passage of HB2442. This is one of the best sweat-free policies that we have seen, and the State of Hawaii can become a real leader in the ethical procurement movement and the fight against sweatshops.