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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

## *How to Battle Sweatshops*

**A**ROUND THE world, abusive labor conditions are so common that there sometimes seems no hope of improvement. Some 250 million children are put to work in poor countries, and at home the Labor Department recently reported that nearly two-thirds of cutting and sewing shops in Los Angeles fail to comply with the minimum wage laws. But last month a nongovernmental group, the Workers Rights Consortium, successfully pressured Nike into sticking up for abused workers in Mexico. And just before leaving office the Clinton administration bequeathed a useful initiative that the Bush team should now build on.

A key to progress is to hold famous brand-name companies accountable for the labor practices of their subcontractors. In the apparel industry, which accounts for a lot of sweatshop labor, the famous retail firms used to get away with the argument that they buy from middlemen all around the world and thus have no way of telling where the clothes are made or under what conditions. But in truth the retailers can monitor labor standards if they choose. A strong commitment from a relatively small number of firms could make a huge difference, because of the concentration of the apparel industry: In the United States, some 70 percent of the market is controlled by just 14 well-known retailers.

The Workers Rights Consortium, an alliance of 67 colleges and universities that buy sweat shirts and other clothing emblazoned with their logos, demonstrated the power of

this approach with its recent success in Mexico. There, the consortium publicized the use of violence as a management tool at a South Korean-owned factory that sometimes supplies Nike. In the past, Nike might have denied responsibility. But, fearing that its brand might be tarnished in the eyes of campus customers, the firm chose instead to mediate between factory managers and workers.

The same approach informs the Clinton initiatives. In its uphill battle against domestic sweatshops, the Labor Department began to go after the big companies that buy from them. On the international front, the administration last month instructed U.S. importers to notify customs officials if they suspect their goods were made with forced child labor. It also made a modest investment in a complementary approach, promising \$45 million in aid for three developing countries that are seeking to end child labor.

Some critics dismiss such initiatives as cultural imperialism. But the aim is not to enforce U.S. labor standards on poor countries that can't afford them; it is to boycott goods made in particularly egregious conditions. Forced child labor does nothing to serve a country's economic development prospects, which depend on getting those children into school; moreover, it is banned by an international treaty signed by nearly all developing countries. There is nothing imperialistic about fighting an abuse that the whole world is ashamed of.