

WORN-DOWN + THREADBARE

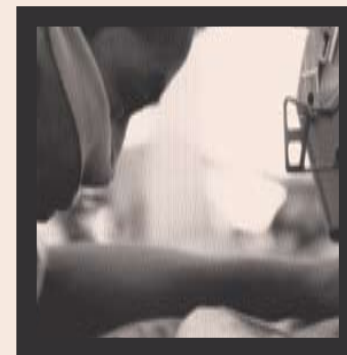
THE (NOT SO) SECRET LIVES OF LOS ANGELES GARMENT WORKERS

For Lupe Hernandez, it all started with a plane ticket. As the youngest child living with six brothers, she found herself a servant in her own household in Mexico City, having taken the place of her mother, who died when Hernandez was only 13. Her father, a street sweeper and an alcoholic, offered her little support, so when Hernandez's sister in the States offered her a ticket to Tijuana, and a chance to join her in Los Angeles, Hernandez jumped at the opportunity. After landing in Tijuana—essentially a wide-open Ellis Island for undocumented immigrants—and almost a thousand miles from her home, she searched the streets for a coyote, or smuggler, which did not take long. Hernandez and a small group were led to the border, where they crossed into San Diego, on foot, only to be arrested by police on

the other side. She was jailed for a day, but would not be deterred. "I didn't care how many times they would catch me," she says. "I wouldn't ever go back to my house." Hernandez left Mexico City on a Wednesday. Five days later, she had crossed the border into the United States and found employment at the garment factory where her sister worked. Hernandez was 17 years old then, and for the last fifteen years, has labored in garment factories and sweatshops in Los Angeles. She says that some employers treated her well, while others forced her to work in unsanitary conditions, locked her in, denied her water, and refused her access to the bathroom. Once again, enough became enough.

This is not a story with a happy ending; one that wraps up neatly with the bad guys being punished and the underdogs prevailing. We are catching up with this story, *in media res*, as the 21st century dawns and the gears of globalization restructure how we manufacture and distribute goods. But at the human level of this transition is Lupe Hernandez and millions of women like her.

As Hernandez says, her story is "*muy, muy típico*." According to a recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center, there are an estimated 12 million undocumented male and female workers in America, today. "Immigrants come to this country and we think that there are a lot of jobs," Hernandez says. "Well, there are many jobs, but they're jobs of exploitation." For many undocumented people in Los Angeles, garment work provides entry into this underground economy, offering those who don't



speak English, or with little work experience, a quick way to make some money. But for those who work in the sweatshops, their efforts are anything but lucrative. Around 67 percent of Los Angeles factories that produce clothing pay their employees less than minimum wage, according to a study, in 2000, by the U.S. Department of Labor. But this is no secret. **IT IS TACITLY UNDERSTOOD THAT THE PEOPLE**

WHO MAKE THE PRODUCTS THAT AMERICANS CONSUME, INCLUDING, AND ESPECIALLY, THE CLOTHES WE WEAR, ARE PROBABLY EXPLOITED AND UNDERPAID, BUT WE LOOK THE

OTHER WAY. After all, the backbone of the American economy was forged by slavery and a model of capitalism that bases its structure on the fact that somewhere in the line of production, someone is not being paid, or is being paid very little.

It's what U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, in 1933, called "the race to the bottom," a global economy, where employers in an unregulated market continually lower their employees' wages in order to stay competitive, which would cause their competitors to lower their workers' wages in response, and so on. This plummeting of wages could then reach a theoretical zero point, where employees' pay would potentially fall to zero.

Stories about sweatshops don't often appear in the mainstream media. Why cover sweatshops as "news," when they're the norm? During the era of Progressivism, Jacob Riis's photographic reportage of the tenements on New York's Lower East Side, at the turn of the century, and Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, opened our eyes to the plight of the lower class. In 1995, sweatshops re-entered the media's viewfinder when authorities discovered an apartment complex of nearly seventy Thai garment workers, some who had been enslaved for up to 17 years, in the sleepy L.A. suburb of El Monte. The workers were housed in an apartment complex, with ten people packed into a room built for two. They worked eighteen-hour days, surrounded by barbed-wire fences and armed guards, as they sewed clothes for some of the biggest retail chains in the country. The media coverage of this human-rights violation reinvigorated the anti-sweatshop movement in Los Angeles and brought awareness to the embarrassing revelation that some retailers were manufacturing clothes without concern for the people who did the backbreaking work. And for those at the top of the retail chain, it seemed that blissful ignorance and denial was de rigueur.

When Spanish filmmaker Almudena Carracedo first came to the U.S., she couldn't understand how one of the richest countries in the world could still use sweatshop labor in the 21st century. She set out to make change by documenting the lives of three garment workers in Los Angeles. What was supposed to be a short project turned into last year's PBS feature, *Made in L.A.*, which focuses on workers in

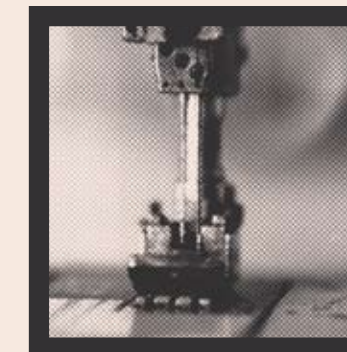
Los Angeles' garment district, who are organizing against one of the biggest perpetrators of workers' rights violations in the city: Forever 21, a retail chain popular among teens for its inexpensive, disposable fashions. "The goal of the film was to show what it was like for people at the bottom," Carracedo says. "It provides a window into the lives of those who make our clothes, and to humanize their story—to make them not seem like just a number." While shooting footage of a garment workers' protest, Carracedo approached a woman in the crowd for a quick on-camera interview: Lupe Hernandez.

In her documentary, Carracedo traces the evolution of garment workers Maria Pineda, a struggling mother; Maura Colorado, an El Salvadoran who, in eighteen years, hasn't seen the sons she left behind; and the charismatic Hernandez, as they attend classes at the Garment Worker Center, at the edge of the Fashion District. The Center is embedded in a small building near Santee Alley—a bustling street where vendors hawk Prada-like bags, Gucci-esque sunglasses, and other faux fashion—and acts as both a respite from the harsh conditions of the factories and a place to organize for workers' rights. The director of the Center, Kimi Lee, whose mother is a Chinese ex-garment worker, understands the hardships and the stress that sweatshops foster.

"MY MOTHER WAS PAID AROUND A DOLLAR FOR EVERY DRESS SHE WORKED ON," SAYS LEE, "WHICH WOULD RETAIL FOR ABOUT \$99, SO SHE MADE ABOUT ONE PERCENT OF THE GARMENT'S END COST. KEEP IN MIND, THIS WAS THE SEVENTIES, AND THAT'S ABOUT THE SAME THAT WORKERS MAKE TODAY."

After three years of organizing boycotts and protests against Forever 21—spreading the word on street corners and filing lawsuits for back wages—the clothing corporation settled the case organized by the Garment Worker Center. Victory, at last. But this isn't the end of the story; it's the beginning of a larger battle for the rights and dignity of all workers. Lupe Hernandez is now on the front lines of this fight, working as an organizer for Sweatshop Watch, and helping to educate workers on ways to break the paradigm of exploitative labor.

"The more that I learn, the lonelier I feel," says Hernandez. "Ignorance protects you, but I realize I've come this far and no one can take that away from me." ☒



CALL TO ACTION AGAINST SWEATSHOPS:

Volunteer or donate to the Garment Worker Center: www.garmentworkercenter.org

Compare the hourly wages of garment-company CEO's and their workers: www.sweatshopwatch.org/index.php?s=18#11

Plan a viewing of Made in L.A.: www.madeinla.com

Support UNITE! and workers' right to organize: www.unitehere.org

Photography: Eduard Chugunov and Almudena Carracedo.