Sweatshops Are Good   
Opposition Brief by Naomi Mathew



Multiple NCFCA aff cases use sweatshops as an argument against free trade. However, while sweatshops are far from ideal, they do an enormous amount of good for workers and their countries. Demonizing them (and free trade) is a mistake.

In NCFCA Lincoln-Douglas Release #18: “Human Dignity” (AFF) (10/15/2018) by Naomi Mathew, the following argument is raised:

Free trade encourages the production of goods at the lowest price possible. This benefits us, the consumers, but it forces companies to cut corners on worker’s rights. Let’s examine Bangladesh, home to many sweatshops that produce cheap clothing for the world. This cheap clothing comes at a high price. For example, a poorly designed sweatshop led to a fire that killed over a hundred workers in 2012.[[1]](#footnote-1) The next year an eight-story building collapse killed over a thousand people after workers were told to continue working despite the cracks in the building walls and an evacuation the day before.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Even on normal days, the conditions in sweatshops are brutal. Hasan Ashraf, a Bangladeshi anthropologist, studied one factory for six months. He found that the dust, smoke, noise, lack of ventilation, and dangerous chemicals in the sweatshops meant workers risk their health daily,[[3]](#footnote-3) all for 65 dollars a month.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Naomi argues that sweatshops are a threat to human dignity. This opposition brief proves that claim wrong. Cards 1-4 show how sweatshops are the best option for people in developing nations. 5-11 argue that sweatshops promote economic development. Finally, cards 12-15 demonstrate the harmful effects of limiting sweatshops to promote fair trade.

The tags used in this brief include:

1. Sweatshops are attractive in developing countries like Bangladesh
2. Sweatshops are no worse than other options in developing countries
3. The alternatives to sweatshops are worse
4. Sweatshops wages are higher than the average wages in their nations
5. The mainstream economic view is that sweatshops are good
6. Sweatshops increase a nations wages and help the economy
7. Sweatshops allow poor nations to develop
8. Sweatshops alleviate poverty and will eventually be eliminated
9. Sweatshops are the first stage of a country’s development
10. Sweatshops created countries like Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan
11. Sweatshops promote gender equality
12. Helping sweatshop workers and not other workers creates a “privileged labor aristocracy”
13. Limiting sweatshops harms workers: examples
14. When a Bangladesh factory let go of 50,000 workers, children’s next option was prostitution
15. UNICEF: sweatshops led children to more dangerous work

Sweatshops Are Good

Sweatshops are attractive in developing countries like Bangladesh

Alex Massie. “In Praise of Sweatshops.” The Spectator, April 26, 2013. <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2013/04/in-praise-of-sweatshops/>

For most of human history most life has been brutal, nasty and short. This is not something to celebrate but nor can it be avoided. Working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories may often remain pretty dreadful. But they are better than life toiling in the fields. Some 45% of Bangladeshis work in agriculture, many of them still, alas, on terms little better than subsistence farming. By contrast, working in a clothing factory is, relatively speaking, an attractive option.

Sweatshops are no worse than other options in developing countries

Paul Krugman. “In Praise of Cheap Labor.” Slate, March 21, 1997. <http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the_dismal_science/1997/03/in_praise_of_cheap_labor.single.html>

Why, then, the outrage of my correspondents? Why does the image of an Indonesian sewing sneakers for 60 cents an hour evoke so much more feeling than the image of another Indonesian earning the equivalent of 30 cents an hour trying to feed his family on a tiny plot of land--or of a Filipino scavenging on a garbage heap?

The alternatives to sweatshops are worse

Nicholas Kristof. “My sweatshop column.” The New York Times, January 14, 2009. <https://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/my-sweatshop-column/?ref=opinion>

My point is that bad as sweatshops are, the alternatives are worse. They are more dangerous, lower-paying and more degrading. And when I struggle to think how we can really make a big difference in the development of the poorest countries, the key always seems to be manufacturing. If Africa, for example, can only develop an apparel industry, it will boom.

Sweatshops wages are higher than the average wages in their nations

Oliver Riley. “How Sweatshops Help The Poor.” The Adam Smith Institute, March 20, 2017. <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/how-sweatshops-help-the-poor>

It is important to remember that conditions in sweatshops are awful to us by our own standards. By the standards of cripplingly poor rural Bangladeshis’, they might well be very attractive. Likewise, the pay that sweatshop workers receive would be seen as unimaginably meagre if we were to frame it in the context of the society in which we live. It would be impossible to exist in the UK on what they earn in sweatshops. But to them, sweatshops bring a pretty penny. Research by David Skarbek in 2006 found that wages from sweatshop work exceed national average income in eight out of ten countries surveyed. In paying more than the national average, it lifts people out of poverty and gives them money to spend and invest in things that improve not only their individual lives, but the condition of the nation as a whole.

The mainstream economic view is that sweatshops are good

Allen Myerson. “In Principle, a Case For More 'Sweatshops.'” The New York Times, June 22, 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/22/weekinreview/in-principle-a-case-for-more-sweatshops.html>

These same nations now export cars and computers, and the economists have revised their views of sweatshops. ''The overwhelming mainstream view among economists is that the growth of this kind of employment is tremendous good news for the world's poor,'' Mr. Krugman said.

Sweatshops increase a nations wages and help the economy

Paul Krugman. “In Praise of Cheap Labor.” Slate, March 21, 1997. <http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the_dismal_science/1997/03/in_praise_of_cheap_labor.single.html>

Workers in those shirt and sneaker factories are, inevitably, paid very little and expected to endure terrible working conditions. I say "inevitably" because their employers are not in business for their (or their workers') health; they pay as little as possible, and that minimum is determined by the other opportunities available to workers. And these are still extremely poor countries, where living on a garbage heap is attractive compared with the alternatives. And yet, wherever the new export industries have grown, there has been measurable improvement in the lives of ordinary people. Partly this is because a growing industry must offer a somewhat higher wage than workers could get elsewhere in order to get them to move. More importantly, however, the growth of manufacturing--and of the penumbra of other jobs that the new export sector creates--has a ripple effect throughout the economy. The pressure on the land becomes less intense, so rural wages rise; the pool of unemployed urban dwellers always anxious for work shrinks, so factories start to compete with each other for workers, and urban wages also begin to rise. Where the process has gone on long enough--say, in South Korea or Taiwan--average wages start to approach what an American teen-ager can earn at McDonald's. And eventually people are no longer eager to live on garbage dumps. (Smokey Mountain persisted because the Philippines, until recently, did not share in the export-led growth of its neighbors. Jobs that pay better than scavenging are still few and far between.)

Sweatshops allow poor nations to develop

Oliver Riley. “How Sweatshops Help The Poor.” The Adam Smith Institute, March 20, 2017. <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/how-sweatshops-help-the-poor>

Which bring me onto my next point. Sweatshops are great for the economic and social development of a nation. The extra money that can be earned can be taxed to provide basic infrastructure and sound governance. More importantly, the extra money earned can be spent by individuals on education, healthcare motorbikes and goats. If people wish to forgo pleasant working conditions (or escape worse working conditions) for these things, then who are we to stop them?

Sweatshops alleviate poverty and will eventually be eliminated

Chelsea Follett. “Student Activists Hurt the Workers They Try to Help.” The Cato Institute, June 21, 2017. <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/student-activists-hurt-workers-they-try-help>

The development process has gotten faster. In South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the process of moving from industrialization to First World living standards took less than two generations, as opposed to a century in the United States. Factories helped workers in those countries escape poverty and their children achieve postindustrial prosperity. As Powell says, “Sweatshops themselves are part of the very process of development that will lead to their own elimination.”

Sweatshops are the first stage of a country’s development

Allen Myerson. “In Principle, a Case For More 'Sweatshops.'” The New York Times, June 22, 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/22/weekinreview/in-principle-a-case-for-more-sweatshops.html>

Then the Four Tigers -- Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan -- began to roar. They made apparel, toys, shoes and, at least in South Korea's case, wigs and false teeth, mostly for export. Within a generation, their national incomes climbed from about 10 percent to 40 percent of American incomes. Singapore welcomed foreign plant owners while South Korea shunned them, building industrial conglomerates of its own. But the first stage of development had one constant. ''It's always sweatshops,'' Mr. Krugman said.

Sweatshops created countries like Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan

Oliver Riley. “How Sweatshops Help The Poor.” The Adam Smith Institute, March 20, 2017. <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/how-sweatshops-help-the-poor>

Sweatshops are often seen as stepping stones on the path to economic development. When millions move away from subsistence living and produce a surplus that can be invested and spent, whole nations rise up out of poverty. This can be seen to have happened in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan (to name but a few), where large scale cheap labour was instrumental in creating the developed nations that exist today.

Sweatshops promote gender equality

Oliver Riley. “How Sweatshops Help The Poor.” The Adam Smith Institute, March 20, 2017. <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/how-sweatshops-help-the-poor>

But I must not neglect the remarkable fact that sweatshops seem to be particularly good for women in the developing world. Rachel Heath and A. Mushfiq Mobarak, of Yale and Washington Universities wrote a paper in 2014 that took a look at the impact the garment industry had on young girls and women in Bangladesh. They found that girls who live in villages closest to garment factories (also known as sweatshops) had significant advantages compared to those who did not. Amongst the findings were that girls living near a factory were 28% less likely to get married in the school year than on average for a Bangladeshi girl, similarly, girls were 29% less likely to get pregnant in a school year. These findings were most pronounced amongst 12-18 year olds. Sam Bowman wrote a blogpost on this fascinating study a few years back.

Helping sweatshop workers and not other workers creates a “privileged labor aristocracy”

Paul Krugman. “In Praise of Cheap Labor.” Slate, March 21, 1997. <http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the_dismal_science/1997/03/in_praise_of_cheap_labor.single.html>

First of all, even if we could assure the workers in Third World export industries of higher wages and better working conditions, this would do nothing for the peasants, day laborers, scavengers, and so on who make up the bulk of these countries' populations. At best, forcing developing countries to adhere to our labor standards would create a privileged labor aristocracy, leaving the poor majority no better off.

Limiting sweatshops harms workers: examples

Chelsea Follett. “Student Activists Hurt the Workers They Try to Help.” The Cato Institute, June 21, 2017. <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/student-activists-hurt-workers-they-try-help>

If someone chooses to work in a factory, she must see that as her best option. Taking away her best option without offering anything better makes her worse off. As Powell shows, prematurely raising of labor standards and wages by governments results in worse options for factory workers. In the early 1990s, Indonesia more than doubled the real value of its minimum wage in response to U.S. threats of trade restrictions—a policy pushed by U.S. student activists. This led to the closure of many manufacturing plants, and Indonesian employment fell by at least 12 and as much as 36 percent. Similarly, when Nike and Adidas limited working hours at Chinese supplier factories to ease the consciences of U.S. activists, “many workers quit, complaining that the overtime pay was no longer enough.” In South Africa, when government officials tried to shut down rural garment factories for failing to comply with minimum wage laws in 2010, “desperate clothing workers threatened to assault officials and burn their vehicles rather than lose their jobs.”

When a Bangladesh factory let go of 50,000 workers, children’s next option was prostitution

Oliver Riley. “How Sweatshops Help The Poor.” The Adam Smith Institute, March 20, 2017. <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/how-sweatshops-help-the-poor>

This point was illustrated well in 1993, when US Senator Tom Harkin proposed a ban on imports from countries that employed children in sweatshops — a measure that would seem to many both noble and just. But in response to the proposal, a factory in Bangladesh let 50,000 of its workers go. According to Oxfam, a significant number of children made unemployed as a result became prostitutes.

UNICEF: limiting sweatshops led children to more dangerous work

Sam Bowman. “Sweatshops Make Poor People Better Off.” The Adam Smith Institute, July 29, 2015. <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/international/sweatshops-make-poor-people-better-off>

And even the most noble-seeming campaigns can backfire. UNICEF argues that early 1990s campaigns to reduce child labour in Bangladesh’s formal economy led to children looking for income in much worse places: stone-crushing, street hustling, and prostitution.

1. Jason Burke and Saad Hammadi. The Guardian, November 25, 2012. “Bangladesh textile factory fire leaves more than 100 dead” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/25/bangladesh-textile-factory-fire> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BBC, May 10, 2013. “Bangladesh factory collapse toll passes 1,000.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22476774> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rebecca Prentice and Geert De Neve. The Conversation, November 23, 2017. “Five years after deadly factory fire, Bangladesh’s garment workers are still vulnerable” <https://theconversation.com/five-years-after-deadly-factory-fire-bangladeshs-garment-workers-are-still-vulnerable-88027> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bdnews24 (Bangladesh’s online newspaper), January 14, 2018. “Bangladesh moves to revise minimum wage for garment workers“ <https://bdnews24.com/business/2018/01/14/bangladesh-moves-to-revise-minimum-wage-for-garment-workers> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)