

What's Happening

IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second-largest district in the country. It has more than a thousand schools and education centers. Every year it spends millions on things like furniture, uniforms and equipment. From now on LAUSD wants more for its money. It wants a guarantee from vendors that nothing came from a sweatshop.

Sweatshops started in Britain in the late 19th century. Workers sewed garments at home or in small workshops. These sweatshops crowded workers into unsafe, unhealthy conditions. They worked long hours for low wages. Usually the workers were women and children.

Now other industries run sweatshops too. They exist wherever people are desperate for work. In poor countries the workers may be citizens. In rich countries they are often illegal immigrants who are looking for better lives. Smugglers promise them good jobs, but they end up in bad situations. They do not know about labor laws. Bosses often force them to work unpaid overtime. They also abuse workers verbally and physically.

Now vendors must tell LAUSD where products come from. They must guarantee that workers earn a "non-poverty" wage. They also must guarantee that working conditions are safe. Workers must have the right to form a union, and the factory may not use child labor.

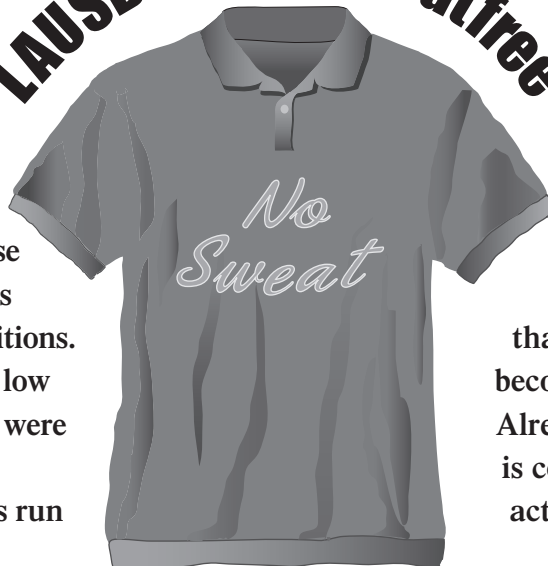
The school district has several reasons for taking this action. It serves many immigrant families. Some of those parents may be working in sweatshops in Southern California. Also, if children are working in sweatshops there or anywhere else, the district wants them in school instead.

LAUSD got help from several organizations. One is a labor union in the garment industry. Another is the Campaign for the Abolition of Sweatshops and Child Labor. This group believes that the school district can become a model for others. Already the City of Los Angeles is considering taking similar action.

It is not clear exactly how the district will enforce its new "sweatfree" policy. District officials may visit some suppliers. Activists also will inform the district about manufacturers that ignore labor laws. The penalty for any violation is \$1,000. In addition, LAUSD will never do business with that vendor again.

Factories will change if they have a reason to. LAUSD is giving them a \$500 million reason. At the same time, it is setting an example for students and families in the district. The sooner people refuse to buy products from sweatshops, the sooner working conditions will change for workers here and around the world.

LAUSD Goes "Sweatfree"



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BIOGRAPHY

DAVID TOKOFSKY

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER, LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

David Tokofsky has been connected to schools in Los Angeles since he was small. He attended elementary, middle and high schools there. For twelve years he taught there too. Now he is a member of the LAUSD Board of Education.

David's father was an executive for Columbia Pictures in Hollywood. David was born there, but his family moved to west Los Angeles when he was six. As he grew up, David never felt any attraction to the movie industry. Instead he became a teacher like his mother.

Social issues have always interested him. At twelve years old he volunteered in George McGovern's campaign for president. In high school he expressed his ideas on issues like oil drilling and school busing. When he graduated, his classmates voted him "Most Outspoken."

In college at UC Berkeley Mr. Tokofsky earned degrees in History and Spanish. He spent five years in college. For one of them he studied in Barcelona, Spain. When he wanted to start teaching, he returned to Los Angeles. The district was hiring lots of teachers then. The fact that he spoke Spanish helped him get a job there. He taught Social Studies at John Marshall High School.

Students in his classes knew that Mr.

Tokofsky believed in changing the world. They challenged him to run for office. In 1995 ran for School Board. Some of his students campaigned door-to-door for him. He won that election, and has won two more since then.



"As a former teacher, I understand that teachers make dozens of important decisions every day."

A typical day for David Tokofsky starts with meetings. These may be with community organizations, schools or public officials. His favorite part of the job is its variety. He works with many people on all kinds of issues. He represents 130 schools across 40 miles of Los Angeles. Several days each week he visits one of the schools.

Mr. Tokofsky was proud to lead LAUSD on the sweat shop issue. When his ancestors came to New York 100 years ago, many of them were laborers. Now he has several friends who fight the

abuse of workers. He saw this as a chance for him and the school district to join the fight.

There is little time now for David Tokofsky to relax. In his free time he is busy with his two young daughters. Then there are lots of other things to work on in the district. One of them will be to do more for middle school teachers and students. Mr. Tokofsky says he always will work in education. As new issues come up, everyone knows he will take an active part in the debate.

Background Information

LAUSD's board of education approved the new policy unanimously. Its policy is broader than those of some universities and cities. They usually apply only to clothing with school logos, items in school bookstores, or police and fire uniforms.

LAUSD did not pledge any money for enforcement. Activists had wanted the district to spend \$125,000 on a third-party certification group.

The garment workers' union that worked with LAUSD is UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees).

Sweatshops in Great Britain were part of the "sweating system." Workers usually received pay based on how many pieces they sewed. The Anti-Sweating League was formed in 1906.

The U.S. Department of Labor defines a workplace as a sweatshop if it violates two or more basic labor laws. Those include child labor, minimum wage, overtime and fire safety.

In 1996 the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that out of 22,000 U.S. garment shops, at least half of them violated wage and safety laws.

The United Nations says that smuggling people is the fastest-growing business of organized crime.

The U.S. wiped out sweatshops in 1938. The government passed the Fair Labor Standards Act to protect the rights of workers. Labor unions raised salaries and fought for safe, fair working conditions. Sweatshops reappeared in the late 1960s, especially as new immigrant workers came to the U.S.

In a 1999 survey 77% of consumers said that a "No Sweat" label, if one existed, would influence which products they buy.

In 1991 Levi Strauss & Co. was the first U.S. company to demand that their suppliers did not use sweatshops.

In Pakistan thousands of children used to work full time making soccer balls. International organizations like UNICEF and the ILO worked with the industry to remove the children. Today women in villages do the work and children go to school.

The State of California's policy covers uniforms and

accessories for state workers such as Highway Patrol officers.

Sweatshop operators often fire workers for being sick. They also fire pregnant women.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

- Price is one factor in the decision to buy something. Name some others.
- If companies abuse their workers, are you abusing them too when you buy their products?
- Why are 90% of all sweatshop workers women?
- Why do labor unions exist?
- Identify some professions that do not have unions, and explain why that is the case.

Vocabulary

Article-specific: vendor; garment; smuggler; abolition; supplier

High-use: desperate; to abuse; to enforce; activist; violation

Sources

Los Angeles Times March 25, 2004

Calgary Herald February 29, 2004

History Today December 1, 2002

No More Sweatshops www.abolishsweatshops.org

Los Angeles Unified School District
www.lausd.k12.ca.us

"Between a Rock and a Hard Place"
by P. Liebhold and H. Rubenstein
americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English - Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development
2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies
2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—*Intermediate and Advanced*

Reading Vocabulary Development / Comprehension
Writing Strategies and Applications
Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

4.4; 4.5; 8.6; 8.9; 8.12; 11.2; 11.3; 11.6; 11.11
Economics 12.4; 12.6