

THIS YEAR'S LINE

Global politics brings some good news and maybe some bad to L.A.'s garment workers

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

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Socially-conscious size 2 women can now celebrate: Last week saw the end of a three-year boycott of Forever 21. The end came with the settlement of a three-year-old lawsuit asserting that workers had been denied pay, were paid less than minimum wage, and had worked under hazardous conditions in producing Forever 21 goods.

The suit was filed in September 2001 by the Garment Workers Center and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. The news has an impact beyond the 19 workers who had pressed the 2001 lawsuit, because Forever 21 agreed to work with advocates to improve conditions in L.A.-area clothing factories.

That could create a significant ripple effect. "It's great that we've come to an agreement and that they're willing to work with us to create better conditions in the industry," says Kimi Lee, cofounder and executive director of the Garment Workers Center in downtown Los Angeles.

The terms of the settlement are confidential, but Lee says, "it would be great" if a retailer the size of Forever 21 would do such things as requiring contractors to post job-rights hotline numbers and permit wage-and-hour workshops so workers can be informed about their rights on the job. Forever 21, like other retailers, has hundreds of contracts. "They might be able to have some influence in raising working standards," she said.

The allegations that triggered both the suit and the related boycott reflect the less-stable aspects of L.A.'s garment industry, the largest in the nation. Like most retailers, Forever 21 uses contract labor to produce its clothing. While big companies like The Gap (Gap Inc. includes Banana Republic and Old Navy) use more than 3,200 offshore factories, companies like Forever 21 use local production to meet quick turnarounds for their drop-dead-up-to-the-minute designs.

It's not uncommon for the contractors who supply such retailers to set up shop, run their workers for long shifts, go bankrupt, and close down before paying what they owe, said Lee. That's one way to stiff those who stitch, process, and pack clothing. Neither Fashion 21 nor the contractors who supplied them were charged with that getaway technique, but they were accused of other labor abuses, according to information from the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC).

The suit alleged, among other things, that Forever 21 was "negligent in its use of sweatshops." The plaintiffs said that they often worked a six days a week, from nine to 12 hours a day, without breaks, and were routinely denied their wages. Forever 21 admitted to no wrongdoing.

But the three years since the workers first filed suit have been plenty rancorous. When the boycott was

launched, Forever 21 filed a defamation suit (now settled) against the Garment Workers Center and named Lee and two colleagues by name. The protest included pickets, leafletting, and tours of college campuses and churches, and ended with the settlement of the lawsuits.

In another development in the world of L.A.'s clothing industry, some garment workers are worried about what happens with the end of the obscurely named Multi-Fiber Arrangement, garment export quotas set up in 1974 to protect the U.S. and Europe from a flood of goods from low-wage markets.

The quotas are set to expire on January 1, 2005 under terms set by the World Trade Organization. The expiration could mean a tectonic shift in international garment production. The abolition of quotas on goods from countries like Bangladesh could contribute to an increase in imports and send working standards tumbling even further for L.A.'s estimated 100,000 garment workers, worry advocates like Sweatshop Watch associate director Alejandra Domenzain. By some projections, half of the world's garment production will go to China, including some L.A. companies.

On a recent Saturday, Marisol, a diminutive 23-year-old garment worker originally from Mexico City, sat in a swivel chair at the Garment Workers Center while her three-year-old daughter silently twined around her mother's legs. Marisol - her name was changed for this story - says businesspeople from both China and Guatemala have visited her downtown L.A. factory, where she makes around \$220 for a 40-hour work week making nurses uniforms. Her boss has told her that he's moving the plant to one or the other country.

Jack Kyser, an economist with the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, thinks that the worry is overstated. L.A.'s specialty is quick turnaround and high fashion garment manufacture, he said - two sectors less likely to be affected by the end of quotas. "It's going to take a while to shake out."

Mario Marin, executive director for Economic Development in Mayor James Hahn's office, emphasizes that the mayor believes garment manufacture to be key to the local economy. Marin is convinced the impact will be minor. "The high-end folks look for quality - we manufacture the best stuff," he said.

"You don't have to panic and say the world's going to end," Domenzain says. "But you at least have to be proactive."

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