



Garment Worker Center
El Centro de Trabajadores de Costura
成衣勞工中心 ศูนย์ช่วยเหลือคนงานเย็บผ้า

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**Garment Workers Celebrate End of Year
With A New Beginning**
End of Campaign Against Forever 21 Announced

LOS ANGELES—Thirty-three garment workers who labored in 21 different Los Angeles sweatshops announced a settlement of their state court lawsuit against the popular clothing retailer Forever 21. The settlement marked the conclusion of the accompanying three-year long national boycott against the retailer. The boycott was launched by the Garment Worker Center (GWC) and the low-wage workers in September of 2001 after numerous workers who made clothes bearing the “Forever 21” label claimed that they were mistreated in their workplace. The garment workers, represented in their legal case by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC), a non-profit civil rights organization, consistently reported that they were denied their lawful wages and exposed to dangerous and filthy working conditions, including rats and cockroaches in the factories and no drinking water or bathrooms.

The disputes between the parties have been resolved to the parties’ mutual satisfaction, and the following statement was issued:

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“Forever 21, Inc., the Garment Worker Center, Sweatshop Watch, and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, on behalf of several Los Angeles garment workers represented by it, have reached an agreement to resolve all litigation between them. In addition, the parties have agreed to take steps to promote greater worker protection in the local garment industry. The parties are pleased to announce the resolution of this matter as a positive and symbolic step forward in demonstrating respect and appreciation for garment workers. Under the parties’ agreement, the national boycott of Forever 21 and related protests at the Company’s retail stores, initiated by the Garment Worker Center in 2001, have ended. The parties share a belief that garment workers should labor in lawful conditions and should be treated fairly and with dignity. Forever 21, the Garment Worker Center and Sweatshop Watch all remain committed to ensuring that the clothing Forever 21 sells in its stores is made under lawful conditions.”

“We are very happy that the campaign has ended. The GWC and the workers who were involved in this public campaign want to thank all our supporters for their energy and spirit and encourage them to stay involved in the fight for workers’ rights,” stated Kimi Lee, Executive Director of the GWC. Lee added, “We look forward to working with Forever 21 to find ways to protect workers. We hope other retailers will join us to make the Los Angeles garment industry a productive and positive place to work.”

Reina Reyes, one of the workers who filed the lawsuit and led the campaign, said, “I’m happy to celebrate the end of the year with the end of this campaign. We came from 21 different factories but were able to organize as one united group to demand that our stories be heard. The campaign shows that workers *can* fight for ourselves and stand up for our rights. We sustained this campaign for over three years. And now we’re happy to announce the case against Forever 21 has been resolved, and the boycott is over.”

The settlement in this case followed on the heels of a much-anticipated Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision, which handed the low-wage workers a significant victory by refusing to affirm a lower court’s ruling that garment workers could state no valid legal claims against a clothing retailer for sweatshop abuses. On March 9, 2004, in *Castro, et al. v. Fashion 21, Inc., et al.* (U.S.D.C. No. CV-01-09487-R), the Ninth Circuit reversed the District Court’s previous dismissal on the merits of a lawsuit by nineteen garment workers who alleged that Forever 21 was legally responsible for the sweatshop conditions under which they made clothes for Forever 21. This decision allowed the workers to proceed with their lawsuit against Forever 21 in state court.

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Subsequent to the Ninth Circuit decision, the nineteen workers who filed the original lawsuit, together with fourteen additional workers with similar stories of workplace abuses, proceeded with their claims against Forever 21 by filing a lawsuit in state superior court in May of 2004. In their lawsuit, the 33 workers alleged that the company engaged in unfair and unlawful business practices under state law, and was negligent in its use of sweatshops. The workers alleged that for varying periods of time between February of 1998 through April of 2004, they typically labored five days a week, nine to thirteen or more hours a day, Saturdays from four to seven hours a day, and sometimes on Sundays—and were routinely denied their legal wages, as well as meal breaks and rest breaks, while making clothes bearing the “Forever 21” label. In addition to long hours and substandard wages, the workers alleged that they were subjected to other deplorable and illegal working conditions, such as unsafe and filthy factories that were poorly lit, poorly ventilated, filled with fabric dust, and infested with vermin.

“We’re pleased that Forever 21 has agreed to take steps to promote positive change in the industry, and that it has stated the company remains committed to ensuring that the clothing it sells in its stores is made under lawful conditions,” commented Christina Chung, Staff Attorney at APALC.

“The courage of low-wage workers standing up for their rights is not only inspirational, but also reminds all companies to examine the impact of their business practices on workers who make their profits possible. We challenge all retailers to become industry leaders by working together with garment workers to implement responsible business practices in order to eliminate sweatshops,” added Chung.

Guadalupe Hernandez, another garment worker who led the campaign and lawsuit, and now an organizer at the GWC, concluded: “Now that the campaign against Forever 21 is over, I am looking forward to a new beginning, to helping more and more workers. My fight to improve working conditions in the garment industry has only just begun.”

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