



# FASTFACTS



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## Making Manitoba Sweat-Free

Since 2002, several thousand Manitobans have sent “Make Manitoba Sweat Free” postcards to Premier Gary Doer asking the Government of Manitoba to implement a No Sweat procurement policy. Alongside this action, three related resolutions have been passed unanimously at NDP provincial conventions in 2002, 2005, and 2006. Despite this public pressure, the Manitoba government still has no policy on its garment-buying practices. As a result, the Manitoba public has no assurances that the approximately \$1 million that our government spends on garments each year is produced ethically.

The garment industry, in Canada and around the world, is rife with abuses. Typical workplace violations include long hours, low wages, forced pregnancy testing, lack of collective bargaining rights, not being allowed to go to the bathroom, child labour, health hazards including unclean air and chemical poisoning, repetitive work which can lead to injury, and physical and sexual abuse.

Manitoba has the opportunity to become the first provincial government to adopt a “no sweat” policy. Adoption of a policy would support a 2002 poll by the Canadian Democracy and Corporate Accountability Commission, co-chaired by Ed Broadbent, which found that 75% of Canadians agreed that governments, “should not buy goods and services from businesses that have a bad record of social responsibility.”

Not all garment factories, be they in Honduras, China, or Manitoba, are bad. There are garment factories in which workers are treated well. Yet economic globalization and the race to the bottom create a situation in which workers around the world are competing directly against one another for contracts. As a result, it is nearly impossible to turn a profit without breaking the rules. Workers, and the environment, usually pay the price.

While economic globalization is dragging standards in the entire garment industry down, the goal of the “no sweat” campaign, is to bring the whole industry up. Rather than searching out specific factories which do not use sweatshop labour (difficult to do given the extent of the problem), a “no sweat” policy asks consumers to use their purchasing power to engage with companies in order to protect workers

and drive up industry standards.

A “no sweat” policy has three key features. The first is disclosure of names and locations of factories. Garment companies rely on consumers being in the dark



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as to where the clothes they wear are produced. Canada, unlike China, has no labeling law requiring companies to list names and locations of factories on garment labels. This lack of a simple tracing method means that when the public does hear of abuses at a particular factory, it is difficult to find out where products made in that factory are ending up. The majority of garment companies do not produce their own clothing. Rather, garments are produced by sub-contractors, and frequently also sub-contractors of sub-contractors and so on. Disclosure would be a significant step in bringing sweatshop violations into the light.

The second feature of a “no sweat” policy is written confirmation from companies that the factories they use are abiding by local labour laws (often more substantial than we in North America assume them to be) as well as the eight core standards of the International Labour Organization which include freedom of association, the abolition of forced labour, and the elimination of child labour. This assurance creates accountability and gives a “no sweat” policy substance, according to internationally agreed upon standards.

The third feature of a “no sweat” policy is a procedure for dealing with abuses. “No sweat” policies never recommend that companies “cut and run” from factories in which sweatshop labour practices are found to be occurring. The “cut and run” response – a frequent reaction by companies who have been exposed - puts already vulnerable workers in precarious positions and avoids getting at the root of the problem. “Cut and run” usually means that companies move to a factory across the country – or across the street – with similar or worse conditions. Instead, a “no sweat” policy recommends that consumers initiate a period of engagement with the company letting them know about reports of the abuses and asking for assurances that the problem will be solved as well as a timeline detailing a plan of action.

This type of engagement has shown significant positive results; in a recent case Canadian T-shirt manufacturer Gildan made significant changes when pressed. Nike and the Gap are both companies that have cleaned up their act significantly due to public pressure and can now be called industry leaders. While the engagement is critical, a “no sweat” policy should nevertheless have some teeth; contracts should be cut if the company refuses to clean up their act after a set-upon period of time.

Currently, without any “no sweat” policy, the Manitoba Government has no formal procedure in place to respond to reports of sweatshop violations attached to garments purchased by our tax dollars.

On April 25, 2006 the City of Toronto became the newest municipality to pass a “no sweat” policy. Manitoba has the opportunity to become the first provincial government to adopt a “no sweat” policy. Adoption of a policy would support a 2002 poll by the Canadian Democracy and Corporate Accountability Commission, co-chaired by Ed Broadbent, which found that 75% of Canadians agreed that governments, “should not buy goods and services from businesses that have a bad record of social responsibility.” It would also support Manitoba municipalities, such as Brandon, as well as other Manitoba institutions currently investigating “no sweat” policies. And, it would send a strong message throughout the country that Manitobans are concerned for the rights of those who labour behind the label.

Our Manitoba government has taken strong steps to initiate the ethical public procurement discussion at the federal-territorial-provincial level. However, despite having produced a sound draft policy, they remain without an official policy. The time to act is now.

- Jennifer deGroot

*Jennifer deGroot is an organic vegetable farmer, project coordinator for UNPAC, and a board member of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives - Manitoba*

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