

# Coalition asks Portland not to buy sweatshop goods

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

A newly formed group is asking Portland City Council for an anti-sweatshop ordinance similar to one being considered by Berkeley, California.

City of Portland officials say they don't know if any of the goods the City buys are made in sweatshops, but the Portland Sweatfree Coalition wants the City to spend \$60,000 — 1 percent of its total goods and services procurement budget — to find out. The money would pay for a part-time staffer to oversee a citizen advisory group and would also fund a private multi-city consortium slated to form in 2007. Portland and other cities would give the consortium a list of things they buy, and the consortium would investigate conditions in the factories making those things.

The campaign is the latest phase of a national movement that began on college campuses to focus attention on poor factory conditions, especially among Third World clothing manufacturers. U.S. apparel manufacturing has been nearly eliminated in the last 30 years as American companies shifted from making clothing domestically to buying it from foreign contractors with factories in some of the world's poorest countries.

In response, several dozen cities have passed anti-sweatshop ordinances of some kind in the last few years, pledging not to subsidize this "race to the bottom" with taxpayer dollars.

The Portland campaign is being led by Deborah Schwartz, a 2006 Lewis and

Clark College graduate who spent four months in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico teaching maquiladora workers about their rights. Her organization, the Portland Sweatfree Coalition, has the endorsement of 16 church and community groups and four local unions: Letter Carriers Branch 82; Communication Workers of America Local 7901; Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 5 at Powell's Books; and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 189, which represents workers at the City of Portland.

So far, the group has met with the mayor, all four commissioners, the Bureau of Purchasing, and the city attorney.

Schwartz said there's support on City Council for an ordinance, though how tough it will be remains to be seen.

An aide to Portland Commissioner Sam Adams said City Council is a long way from committing money to police the issue, particularly if it's not clear how much city money is currently going to sweatshops.

Most of the city's \$60 million procurement budget pays for big-ticket items like police cars and fire trucks, whereas the focus of the anti-sweatshop movement has been on clothing. The only apparel purchases to go through the Bureau of Purchasing are contracts totaling \$1.3 million a year to provide police and fire uniforms.

Blumenthal Uniform Company supplies Portland police and fire uniforms, while Class Act Uniforms supplies jeans, T-shirts and sweatshirts to the Fire



Bureau. Doug Keiper, Blumenthal's Portland sales manager, says some items may be manufactured abroad, none are manufactured in sweatshops. Clothing supplied by Class Act, as of last year, was being manufactured in Arkansas, Massachusetts, Mexico and Honduras.

Last October, at the request of Portland Mayor Tom Potter, suppliers of police and fire uniforms were asked to identify their sources. Seattle-based Fehcheimer Brothers, the source of police shirts, trousers, jackets and motor breeches, said its products are made by union workers at company-owned facilities in the United States. Gerber Outerwear and WaterShed Inc. said their products are made in Edinburg, Texas

and Salem, Oregon, respectively. Sea Western firefighter gear is made in Kentucky, while its boots are made in Germany. Law Enforcement Equipment Distribution sells Nelson leather belts manufactured in Scio, Oregon, Safariland holsters manufactured in Ontario, Calif., nylon duty gear manufactured in Oregon City, and bicycle helmet covers made in Eugene.

A sweatshop is generally a factory in which employees work long hours at low wages under poor conditions. The U.S. Department of Labor defines it as a business that violates wage and hour, child labor or other employee-protection laws. Under that definition, two-thirds of Los Angeles clothing manufacturers were found to be sweatshops in a 2000 DOL investigation.

Schwartz says the campaign's goal isn't to get local governments to stop buying from sweatshops, but to get them to use their influence to improve conditions. It's still possible that the City is buying sweatshop-made goods, Schwartz said — in clothing purchases by individual bureaus. City bureau chiefs can make purchases of \$5,000 or less without going through the Bureau

of Purchasing, and that includes uniforms in some bureaus.

Aramark supplies uniforms and laundry services to the Environmental Services, Transportation and Maintenance Bureaus.

Richard Beetle, business manager of Laborers Local 483, said wastewater treatment workers are issued Fahrenheit-brand custom-embroidered hats made in China.

To make anti-sweatshop mandates more practical for small-scale purchases like these, anti-sweatshop activists want to create a designated supplier list in which vendors would be designated as sweatshop-free by an independent consortium like the Workers' Rights Consortium, which performs that function for participating universities.

The City of Portland already has a Sustainable Procurement Strategy, passed in 2002, that commits the city to favor goods and services that minimize negative environmental impacts, like chlorine-free recycled paper and energy-efficient vehicles. Bureau of Purchasing director Jeff Baer says what Portland Sweatfree Coalition is requesting isn't comparable.

Under its proposed ordinance, the City of Portland would join a consortium of municipal governments and form a citizen advisory group that would serve as a kind of watchdog, recommending products for investigation. And all vendors doing business with the city would be required to file an affidavit declaring that their products were manufactured in facilities that respected local labor laws.

"We really don't want a feel-good resolution," Schwartz said. "We want something with teeth."

The Portland Sweatfree Coalition will host Chie Abad, a former sweatshop worker from the U.S. territory of Saipan, at an event Friday, Sept. 15, at 7 p.m. at First Unitarian Church, 1011 SW 12th Ave., Portland. For more info: [www.sweatfree.org/portland](http://www.sweatfree.org/portland).

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