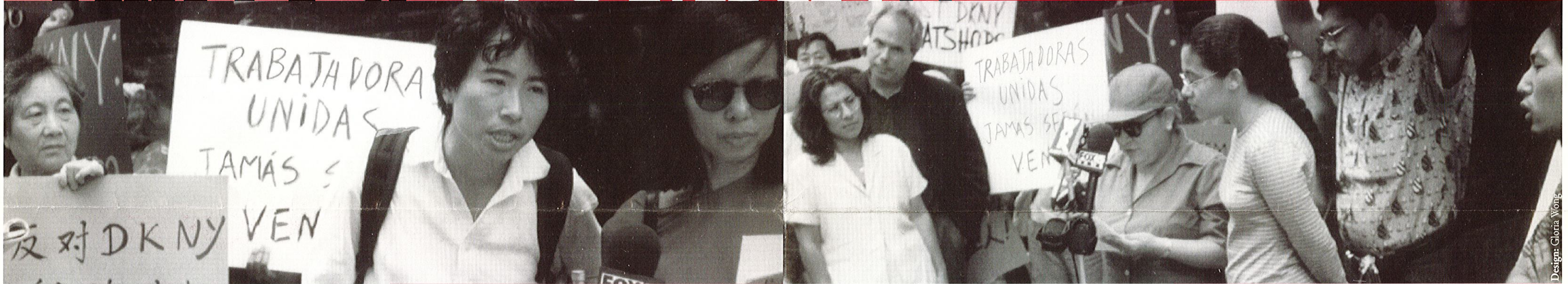


# Ain't I a WOMAN!?



Design: Gloria Wong

## Code of Conduct: Asking the Fox to Guard the Chicken Coop

Our “Ain't I a Woman?!” campaign has been launched amidst a great deal of anti-sweatshop activism. For the most part, unfortunately, sweatshops are framed as a problem of “the other”: far-away workers in Third World countries, immigrant garment workers in this country hidden away behind barbed wires and locked gates.

An upsurge of activity has been directed at helping these workers: the U.S. Labor Department launched a “No Sweat” campaign to encourage manufacturers to sign on to “voluntary compliance” with labor laws. Students are demanding that their schools contract only with companies that agree to a “code of conduct” — which typically prohibits forced labor, child labor and violations of labor laws — and to “public disclosure” of where and under what conditions their goods are made. Advocacy groups are organizing consumer boycotts of companies exploiting workers abroad, chasing companies like Disney from Haiti to China and promoting the union label.

A new form of imperialism has emerged, where U.S. consumers are depicted as the key agents of change and the ones who know what's best for those sweatshop workers who are suffering. Power is seen to reside in your ability to buy things, as a consumer, rather than in your ability to make things or make things run as a worker.

This focus on sweatshops overseas actually helps to protect sweatshops in the U.S., diverting attention from the expanding sweatshop system here and driving work from abroad to domestic sweatshops.

Voluntary compliance and monitoring measures are also naive. “No Sweat” and Codes of Conducts are based on the premise that corporations are well intentioned. How effective can these measures be if they are asking corporations to voluntarily contradict the very goal of corporations: to make a profit? Moreover, even if independent monitors investigate factories, workers will not tell the truth about sweatshop conditions if they are not organized to face threats of harassment, firing and blacklisting.

For example, workers from two of the largest sweatshops in Brooklyn, N.Y., were forced to work as long as 137 hours a week producing Street Beat Sportswear for retailers like Sears. Several were fired after asking for a day off. Workers were owed almost \$300,000 in unpaid minimum wage and overtime pay and damages. Street Beat had three years earlier signed two compliance agreements with the Department of Labor.

## Taking Their Fate into Their Own Hands

Here the story changes. The Street Beat workers from Brooklyn did not wait for another compliance agreement to be signed. They organized together with the support of other garment workers from the Chinese Staff & Workers' Association and other young workers from the National Mobilization Against SweatShops. We came together as working people to fight not only for the Street Beat workers' owed wages, but also for their reinstatement to their jobs. We demanded that Sears commit to ensuring that 100 per cent of its goods be produced in law-abiding factories. To prevent them from moving work away in retaliation against our organizing, we also demanded that the company make sure that 75 per cent of its goods be produced in local communities. Standing up to harassment, threats and blacklisting, these workers succeeded in winning almost \$300,000 from Street Beat.

Mrs. Lai, the DKNY worker from another factory, supported this battle. Inspired, she decided to expose and fight the cruel and discriminatory practices at her unionized mid-town factory. Her courage emboldened other DKNY workers — Olga, Maria, Fanny, Lupe, Lilia, Ruth and another Maria — who have now stepped forward.

These women are now fighting for their jobs back and their owed overtime pay. They are also demanding that DKNY re-open her factories, and ensure that its women workers will no longer suffer harassment and that it will no longer close factories when workers speak up for their rights. Last, the workers are demanding that DKNY commit to producing all of its clothing under legal conditions.

## Why Target Retailers?

Today big retailers such as DKNY (a manufacturer as well) or Sears are allowed to walk away with billions of dollars by stripping women of their rights and crushing the life out of them. They sit on the top of a subcontracting pyramid and claim zero responsibility. Who's responsible for inhuman and illegal working conditions in the sweatshops? Retailers hang back looking innocent, and let the blame fall on the manufacturers. Manufacturers duck and run, leaving the contractors (factory owners) to blame. Factory owners squeeze profits out of their workers while portraying themselves as victims.

Retailers, as the sellers of the clothing made in garment factories, hold the most power in this sub-contracting system as they decide what goods they will accept to sell and at what price they will purchase them. Manufacturers, who design the clothes, must offer them a good deal. Competition among manufacturers to sell their garments to retailers — on top of manufacturers' thirst for profits — drives down the prices for production.

And, who gets squeezed the most in this relentless drive to maximize profits? The women toiling long hours in New York City under oppressive conditions sewing DKNY labels sold at DKNY boutiques and Macy's. The women sewing Street Beat labels that were sold at Sears. The women sewing Kathie Lee labels that sold at Wal-Mart. What happens when they stand up for their rights? The contractor shuts down when Donna Karan pulls out her clothes. The Streetbeat contractor moves around the corner under a new name. Manufacturers take their work to another factory — to another block, or another part of the city, country or world — to exploit someone else.

Working people holding retailers accountable to them cuts to the chase of the sub-contracting system. As the top entity that ultimately holds the purse strings, the retailer has the power to make sure that 100 per cent of its goods are made under legal conditions. It also has the power to ensure that its manufacturers don't run away to other states or other countries in their search for cheap labor, punishing workers that organize for their rights and depriving local factories and workers of work.



## Women's Work and the Sweatshop Economy

The sweatshop conditions faced by the DKNY garment workers are not so far removed from the experiences of most women workers in this country. Women are disproportionately concentrated in clerical, service-sector and manufacturing jobs. Among all women workers in the U.S., one in five is a cashier, secretary or teacher. Nearly six out of 10 African American women work as nursing attendants, janitors, cleaners, cooks and maids. Immigrant women often take jobs as domestic workers, hotel and restaurant workers, orderlies, nursing assistants and laborers in manufacturing jobs such as garment and meat processing. Unfortunately, these very important areas of work, which we all depend on, tend to be devalued and lower-paid. And regardless of educational levels, in any occupation women are routinely paid less than men doing the same work.

And this is just the woman's “official” job. Regardless of race or class, women are still the primary caretakers of children and elderly relatives, and still take on a disproportionate responsibility for housework. This “women's work” is never recognized or valued as work, but is simply expected of women.

Adding insult to injury, women who have been caring for their children at home and receiving welfare benefits are now being forced into workfare, a government-supported cheap-labor program. These women are working starvation wages doing demeaning and dead-end work, while often having no choice but to pay a babysitter to watch their children.

Stuck in low-wage jobs and shouldering primary responsibility for their children, many women lack the economic autonomy to escape abusive relationships at home. Those who do are sometimes forced to work several jobs or turn to sex work as a quick way to put food on the table. Nearly a third of all families headed by women are living below the poverty line. Even well-paid professional women cannot escape hard choices around career and motherhood. For many, advancement means giving all your time, which means having no time for children. Moreover, many bosses fail to offer maternity leave or to guarantee that mothers' jobs will be available when they return.



# The stories

of Kwan Lai and Lilia Gutierrez tell us a lot about what it means to be a working woman in the United States today. For years these

two women sat bent hour after hour sewing thousand-dollar Donna Karan clothing, worn by Hollywood stars and first ladies.

They worked days, evenings and even Saturdays. They never received overtime pay.

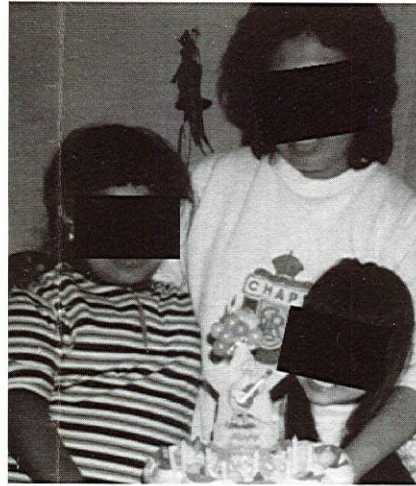
## I worked at Eastpoint factory

for eight years making Donna Karan jackets with price tags of \$6,000. It took a whole day to make one. We Latina workers were the only ones working by hand. They said we would break the machines. They barely paid above minimum wage and did not pay overtime. Working by hand is much harder, but they paid Chinese workers who were using machines more anyway.

If we raised our heads, they would tell us through the speakerphone, "No talking, work." The toilet used to break. They would blame us, saying Latinas break everything. Before we left for the day, they would frisk us.

When my first daughter was three months old they said I had to work late or not work at all. My babysitter couldn't be with my child all day. But I was a single mother and so I had to tolerate this. When I was pregnant with my second child, the supervisor said, "No more doctor's appointments, or no more work." I left the job for a year and a half. When I came back they forced me to work overtime without overtime pay again. I had to pay the babysitter for the extra hours. I paid her \$120 out of the \$250 I was making a week.

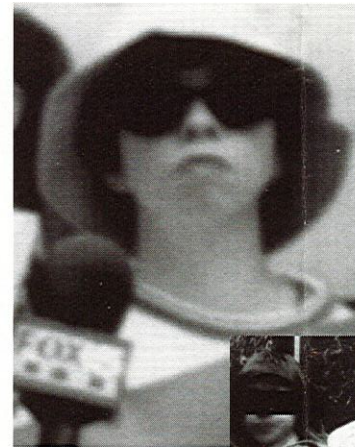
I worked 10, 11 hours a day, six days a week. I woke up at 5:30 in the morning to get my kids ready for school. Sometimes I sent them without breakfast. I left at 7 and came back at 8 or 9 at night. I would pick up my kids, make dinner and prepare for the next day. All I did was work.



One day I heard that someone complained against the boss. Somebody called one of us Latinas to ask if we would join her. We were afraid. When she got her job back, we found out it was Mrs. Lai. They said not to eat near her because the boss would think we were on her side. I felt very sad seeing her eating alone.

One day the factory closed. The boss said she couldn't continue with the business. Some Chinese workers were blaming Mrs. Lai. Then NMASS called and invited me to meet with her. We were suspicious and afraid. I didn't have a job. Would we get blacklisted? Talking with Mrs. Lai changed my mind. I wasn't afraid anymore. Me and six Latina co-workers joined her. I knew wherever I would go, conditions would be the same. We decided to demand our jobs back.

— Lilia Gutierrez



## I started working

at a factory making DKNY clothing in May, 1992. Like most Chinatown factories, this mid-town factory was unionized. But unlike Chinatown factories, we were paid by the hour instead of by the piece. But it felt like being in prison. If we were two minutes late we were docked one half-hour of our pay. We had to keep our heads down at all time once we started working. No looking up. No talking to anyone. Can you imagine? A big room with rows and rows of machines and all of us, looking down. Three surveillance cameras watched everything we did. They checked our purses before we left at the end of the day. No going to the bathroom — it was often padlocked. No water, with the drinking fountain broken. No making or receiving phone

calls, not even for emergencies. All those years I never gave out my factory number to anyone except my husband. One time my daughter Winnie was sick. Her father called me because he needed to ask where our insurance card was. He called three times and the boss kept hanging up on him. The third time, my husband said, "If you don't let me talk to her, I'll sue you." (Mrs. Lai's daughter Jennifer, aged 7, adds that: "The boss is mean. When I'm sick and throwing up, she doesn't let my mommy come home to take care of me.")

Why did I stay there if it was so bad? Well, I have to think about my two small children, Winnie and Jennifer. They are 11 and 7. It takes so much to raise them. Coming from Hong Kong, I had no idea working conditions could be so bad in the U.S. It's worse than being a slave! And I barely had any time to spend with my daughters.

Now, most important, I want to go back to work. If I go back to work, I can watch the boss. She can't break the law again if she knows I am watching. Other workers in the community will see that I fought for my rights, won my job back and got my money back too. They will see that you don't have to be afraid of going after what you deserve.

— Kwan Lai





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"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place — **And ain't I a woman?**

"Look at me! Look at my arm. I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me — **And ain't I a woman?**

"I could work as much, and eat as much as man — when I could get it — and bear the lash as well! — **And ain't I a woman?**

"I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me — **And ain't I a woman?**"

— **SOJOURNER TRUTH**, an escaped slave who dedicated her life to fighting against slavery and racism and for women's rights. This quote is from her speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention.

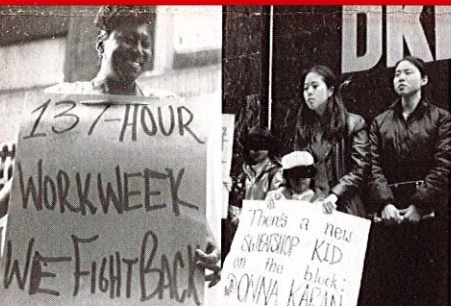
# Ain't I a WOMAN?!

## A CAMPAIGN OF THE NATIONAL MOBILIZATION AGAINST SWEATSHOPS

**National Mobilization Against SweatShops (NMASS)** is a grassroots effort of youth and working people of all backgrounds and communities. We are a membership organization dedicated to fighting for control over our time and our lives. Through our educational and organizing work, we are demanding the right to work 40 hours a week at a living wage for all of us as working people, whether we are overworked, underemployed or working at home caring for our children.

What You Can Do

Endorse the "Ain't I a Woman?!" campaign • Distribute our petition among your friends, family, co-workers and other students • Write a letter to Donna Karan and send it to NMASS for a mass mailing • Spread the word about DKNY through e-mails, faxes and word of mouth • Get a group together and buy an ad in your local newspaper • Wear and sell our campaign T-shirts • Put up stickers • Set up a class discussion, presentation or a house party to talk about the campaign • Write letters to celebrities who wear DKNY clothes and send a copy to us • Call your legislator to support legislation holding retailers accountable • Produce videos, skits or fanzines on the issue or come up with new ideas! • Become a member of NMASS • Contribute to the campaign; write checks out to NMASS



### What is Our "Ain't I a Woman?!" Campaign?

Mrs. Lai, Mrs. Gutierrez and other DKNY workers have been joined by other women workers who also have tolerated abusive conditions for the sake of their families. Many women are inspired by the example of these DKNY workers who risked so much to fight to be treated with respect like human beings, and to have some say about their working conditions and time.

Our campaign has drawn in women workers from across the board who are experiencing longer hours, lower wages and worsening conditions. Whether we work in a corporate law firm or a garment factory, control over our time and our lives is slipping away.

A century after Sojourner Truth's struggles against racism and sexism, women workers are stepping up the fight against the most destructive form that modern-day racism and sexism has taken: economic segregation and the perception that crumbs are better than nothing. Refusing to be treated like slaves or second-class citizens, we are coming together to build upon Sojourner Truth's struggle and proclaiming

# "Ain't I a WOMAN?!"

- If You're in New York City:**
- Come to bi-weekly general meetings on Wednesdays at 7 p.m. — call (718) 633-9757 for directions
  - Take part in weekly tabling on Fridays in the Fashion District