

# **SWEATSHOPS IN FASHION IN LA; GARMENT FIRMS THRIVE ON CHEAP, ILLEGAL LABOR**

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## **Body**

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**Sweatshops** seem to be everywhere in the aging buildings in this city's bustling **garment** district.

**Labor** enforcement officials call it a growing, seemingly intractable problem: a booming fashion industry that **thrives** on the region's **cheap** and plentiful immigrant **labor**.

"I cannot say it's a good job," says Miguel Perez, a transplant from Puebla, Mexico, his thin body hunched over a sewing machine at a shop on 8th Street. "But what else is there to do?"

Southern California is home to about 10,000 **garment** shops - about half of them **illegal**. The local clothes-making business - the largest in the nation - has tripled in the past five years to an \$ 8-billion-a-year industry.

Working for as little as \$ 1.50 an hour, **illegal** immigrants show up before dawn and often toil late into the night in gritty, sweltering conditions.

Driven by clothing designers and manufacturers who want more for less, and by desperate competitors, employers demand more of their **sweatshop** workers while lowering their wages.

Last month state and federal investigators raided an El Monte **sweatshop** and found 72 Thai immigrants **laboring** under slave-like conditions. The clothes made in the cramped factory found their way to the racks of the nation's top stores, from Mervyn's to Bullock's to Neiman Marcus.

The **Labor** Department named the Hecht division of St. Louis-based May Department Stores Co. and Venture Stores Inc. of O'Fallon, Mo., as possible receivers of the clothes.

Later in August, authorities detained 55 people, including a 12-year-old girl, at three Los Angeles **sweatshops**.

But manufacturers and retailers alike expressed shock when they learned that some of their merchandise was made in abusive and **illegal** work environments.

Analysts say the industry's cutthroat nature encourages shady production tactics. Moreover, the recent recession is driving many retailers into bankruptcy and out of business.

That leaves a few major retailers and a handful of gigantic discount chains, consolidating the industry in the hands of a select few who make decisions that once were the province of suppliers.

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"It allows the retailers to basically dictate the terms of the relationship, in terms of quality, in terms of design - and in terms of price," said Carl Steidtmann of Management Horizons, a retail consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio.

Despite increasing pressure on businesses to reform, the area's willing and illegal labor force not only remains, but grows.

Antonio Martinez, a worker at Twin Fashions, told state labor inspectors that he made \$ 173 at his last job for two weeks of work, finally quitting because his employers refused to pay him for at least 19 hours of labor. But he seemed reluctant to pursue a complaint.

"From what I've seen, everybody's paid the same and that's just what they pay you," said Martinez, a 20-year-old who arrived mid-August in Los Angeles from Mexico. "If you want to make more, you just work faster."

## Graphic

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PHOTO; Color Photo by Associated Press - Miguel Perez, from Puebla, Mexico, carries clothing in Los Angeles for Twin Fashions, a sewing shop that stitches dresses for a major women's label. The garment district is full of sweat shops.

## Classification

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