

Northern Marianas workers testify in Washington on sweatshop abuses in US island territory

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Immigrant workers and federal investigators described horrific abuses and conditions of virtual slavery in testimony before a US Senate committee hearing March 31 on the treatment of workers in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. CNMI is a Western Pacific territory administered by the United States.

The Marianas were a major battleground between the United States and Japan in World War II, and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was carried out from a base in Tinian, part of the island chain. Today the Marianas serve as a base for garment manufacturing and a sex-tourism industry catering to Asian businessmen whose owners have reaped hefty profits by brutally exploiting immigrant workers. The victims, mostly from mainland China, are lured by employers with false promises of a better life.

Immigrant workers on the island outnumber US citizens by about 35,000 to 27,000. Those who come to Marianas often pay thousands of dollars to middlemen, who tell them they will arrange good-paying jobs in America. Some 20,000 of these immigrants are crowded into barracks that resemble forced labor camps. Many lack running water, adequate toilets or proper ventilation.

Sweatshop owners reap a double dividend from operating in a US Trust Territory, since they receive favored access to the US market, paying no import duties, but at the same time are given a special exemption from federal minimum wage laws and labor standards. The local minimum wage is just \$3.05 an hour, but workers often don't receive even that pittance.

The hearing before the Senate Committee on Energy

and Natural Resources followed a two-month investigation by the US Department of the Interior, which has jurisdiction over the CNMI. Seven undercover investigators, two of them recruited from among the sweatshop workers themselves, collected statements from over 400 workers and summarized their findings to the committee.

Eric Gregoire, a human rights advocate for the Catholic Church, told the committee, "No other country on earth, which claims to be a democracy, allows anything remotely akin to the apartheid system caste system flourishing on Saipan" (the main island in the CNMI.) Four former sweatshop workers testified about conditions on the islands. One girl from the Philippines told how she had been lured to the Marianas at the age of fourteen. When she got there she was forced to dance nude and perform sex acts on customers in a nightclub on Saipan.

The Interior Department report found that the importation of foreign workers to the CNMI has increased in recent years. It documented widespread abuses including the coercion of female garment workers to undergo abortions and the recruitment of Russian and Chinese women for prostitution. The report is now being reviewed as the basis for possible criminal prosecution of sweatshop owners.

Excerpts of the report were published by the *Washington Post*. Investigators declared, "Our country is in a poor position to criticize other countries for violating their citizens' human rights when we deny their citizens basic rights in the CNMI, and cheat and physically abuse them as well." The report cited increasing hate crimes against foreign workers and serious health problems, including high levels of

tuberculosis.

In a separate report, Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) said that he had met with several Chinese men who had been victimized by labor recruiters. They had asked him to help arrange the sale of their kidneys so they could repay the money they had borrowed and pay for their trip home.

The Clinton administration has introduced legislation calling for the extension of US minimum wage and immigration laws to the Marianas. The proposed legislation is unlikely to do much to change conditions for immigrant workers in the CNMI given that the US government has done little or nothing to enforce already applicable labor laws, including those banning child labor, civil rights violations, human smuggling and sexual abuse.

Moreover, in a concession to sweatshop owners, Clinton has only called for a gradual raising of the minimum wage. Further, the administration's bill panders to chauvinist sentiment by stipulating that factories will be prohibited from using the "made in USA label" if they employ less than 50 percent US citizens.

Far from arousing any condemnation in the corporate-controlled media, the revelations about conditions of near-slavery in a US island possession have been effectively suppressed. This is not unrelated to the list of big American companies which profits from the \$820 million exported from CNMI to the US each year, including The Gap, Liz Claiborne, Banana Republic, J.C. Penney, Ralph Lauren and Brooks Brothers.

The only outrage expressed in the media was on the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which denounced the hearing, convened by conservative Alaska Republican Senator Frank Murkowski, as a "Senate Inquisition." The *Journal* praised the CNMI's "free market experiment" and warned that imposing the US minimum wage would "price Saipan further out of competitiveness."

A similar reaction was voiced by a powerful Republican congressman, House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, who took a New Year's junket to the islands and spoke at a banquet sponsored by one of the biggest garment manufacturers, Willie Tan. DeLay hailed the sweatshop industry as a "free market success" and denounced the proposed labor legislation as an effort to "kill economic freedom."

A favorite of the Christian fundamentalists, DeLay presented the defense these barbaric conditions as a moral imperative. He told his audience, which profits from sweatshop exploitation and forced prostitution: "Stand firm. Resist evil. Remember that all truth and blessings emanate from our Creator." He went on to declare that he favored creating a similar "guest worker program" for Mexicans in the United States that would eliminate the minimum wage.



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