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## **Commentary**

### **We Can Build Up to a Living Wage;**

#### **Sweatshops: Get more firms to adhere to the code of conduct on working conditions before tackling the salary issue.**

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In 1996, the Clinton administration hosted a series of discussions about eliminating sweatshops from the apparel industry. This followed the discovery that immigrants had been forced to work against their will at an El Monte apparel factory. It also followed attacks on Kathie Lee Gifford, the entertainer-turned-apparel merchant who learned, in very public fashion, that garments bearing her name were constructed in sweatshops.

From those discussions, the Apparel Industry Partnership was formed by human rights leaders, union officials, clergy and apparel manufacturers. In April 1997, the AIP released a code of conduct, outlining acceptable work practices. This was the first time such a broad group could agree on standards. The code places a cap on weekly work hours and provides for mandatory days off. It requires that workers be paid legal minimums or the prevailing regional wage, whichever is greater. It forbids child labor and demands safe working conditions.

For participating companies, the code applies to any facility where their garments are made. Given that most such facilities are overseas in developing nations, the code--if broadly applied--could improve conditions for millions of workers.

Earlier this month, after months of difficult negotiations, the AIP completed the two steps that must precede implementation. The first is the creation of a governing body, the Fair Labor Assn. The second is determining the extent to which participating companies must be audited by independent organizations to determine if they are living up to the code. These external validations are essential to give consumers certainty that their clothes are not made by children or in sweatshops.

The monitoring regime is rigorous. It requires that 30% of a company's facilities be audited in each of the first two years. The number is reduced to 15% thereafter and can be lowered if the company has an excellent record. The percentage of factories audited is several times greater than for financial or quality audits. Significantly, the association's executive director can help determine which factories are investigated.

But as the association prepares to move forward, the inevitable attacks come. In this case, they are orchestrated by lobbyists for the Union of Needleworkers, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), an original AIP member whose president had described the code as "historic."

UNITE's primary criticism is that the agreement does not provide a genuine living wage for those who assemble products sold by the participating companies. (This is generally defined as enough to provide food, shelter, medical care, clothing and some savings.) It is a just goal--one the AIP wholeheartedly supports. But forcing it on the partnership, which today boasts only seven corporate members, is at best ill-advised.

As important as the issue is, the AIP is not the vehicle to achieve the goal of providing a living wage for workers around the world. The root causes behind this issue go well beyond apparel, touching nearly every industry in every part of the world. It is an appropriate battle for governments and trade unions to lead; it is simply too massive a goal for one small partnership confined to one industry.

If implemented in its current form, the apparel agreement could take great strides toward eliminating those factories fitting the common description of a sweatshop, but only if membership grows. We're now in position to make that happen.

With an exclusive focus on eliminating sweatshops, the effort can be portrayed to apparel executives as reasonable--because it is. It has the imprimatur of the highly respected Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, but is fair enough to be acceptable to such billion-dollar companies as Nike and Liz Claiborne. Moving now, we can make significant progress. Holding back and demanding that the living wage banner be carried by the apparel industry would be yet another case of the perfect being the enemy of the good.

There are many other companies that can make the claim that they've implemented most steps embodied in the code. And they are precisely the companies that should get on board, so consumers can reward them for their ethical stands.

A focus on increasing wages is the right long-term strategy. But what of the short-term, particularly when it's defined as roughly the length of a childhood? There are a quarter of a billion children working today. Insisting immediately on the perfect solution would deprive them of a fundamental human right: the right to a childhood.

Credit: Kevin Sweeney, an executive at Patagonia Inc., is a founding member of the Apparel Industry Partnership