

The Fight Against Forever 21: Low-wage Immigrant Worker Organizing for Fairness and Dignity *(article about campaign messaging from 2005 SPIN publication)*

In 2001, the Garment Worker Center, working on behalf of garment workers in Los Angeles, filed a suit against clothing retailer Forever 21, Inc., and began a three-year struggle to win worker safety, respect and dignity. Workers manufacturing clothes for Forever 21, Inc. said they were denied lawful wages and exposed to dangerous working conditions. Some worked six days a week, 12 hours a day for far less than minimum wage.

With the help of Sweatshop Watch, an organization serving low-wage worker nationally and internationally, and Asian Pacific Legal Center, which provides Asian Pacific Islander communities with legal services, education and civil rights support, the Garment Worker Center along with garment workers waged a boycott campaign against Forever 21. Through persistence and coordination, workers reached an agreement with the clothing retailer three years later on December 15, 2004. (At the time of this report, the terms of the agreement had not yet been made public.) The campaign required organizing and educating workers as well as educating the public, and in particular, consumers of the clothing chain.

Conditions at today's factories are not far from where they were in the early 1900s. According to the Garment Worker Center: "The machines are crammed in with little ventilation, lots of dust particles in the air, chemicals and machinery out in the open, and workers do not have protective gear.... The bathrooms are locked and dirty, with dozens of workers – men and women – sharing just one. There is no clean water, and the lighting is bad. Many workers cannot take breaks or must eat lunch quickly. Some cannot go to the bathroom unless they finish sewing a quota. Some workers cannot look up from their machines and are not allowed to talk to each other. Factories are divided by language and race. Workers come in very early and leave late and do not receive overtime. Some workers must take work home after working over 10 hours in a day. The average LA garment worker makes less than \$14,000 a year and does not receive health benefits. Workers who have come to the Garment Worker Center average a wage of \$3.18 per hour. They can't even call in sick without being docked pay."

Despite laws on minimum wage, workers compensation and child labor, the Department of Labor does little monitoring. Without enforcement, low-wage workers - largely Latino, Asian, Afro-Caribbean, and immigrant – and their families suffer the consequences, and bear the burden of a perpetually lowering corporate bottom line.

Motivating Messages

Campaign organizers were well aware that identifying and knowing target audiences were critical to success. At the onset, they identified two primary audiences: workers and consumers of Forever 21 clothing.

With workers, many of whom were not aware of their rights, the goal was to raise their consciousness and leadership in the campaign. A key component of the campaign was that it was led by workers, who were the decision makers moving the campaign forward and adopting appropriate communications strategies needed for each step. They conceived of flyers with slogans that read, “Are you paid \$6.75?” (California’s minimum wage) to pique other workers’ attention and remind them of the widespread exploitation in the industry. Pocket-size booklets on workplace rights as well as graphics/comics on filing wage claims with the Labor Commissioner were offered in Chinese, Spanish and other languages.

As spokespeople for the campaign, workers shared their personal stories – their own experiences, what they witnessed at their workplace - at churches, school campuses, and hearings. Their testimonies were broadcasted on television and print, including a feature story in widely read *Glamour* magazine, whose editor contacted organizers for the story after hearing much about the campaign through other media sources. Collectively, the worker testimonies painted a new image of reality for clothing consumers across the country.

Fashioning a Winning Message

With consumers, the organizers relied upon the successes of previous anti-sweatshop campaigns, which had helped frame “sweatshops” as negative, exploitative and undesirable. By calling attention to the sweatshop conditions of Forever 21 manufacturers, the campaign automatically placed the retailer on the defense and set the terms of the debate.

Flyers, made to look like store discount coupons, bore the message: “99% of the price of this Forever 21 blouse that sold for \$13.00 went into Forever 21’s pockets and the pockets of its manufacturers and contractors! The garment worker who sewed the blouse here in Los Angeles only received 1% of that money... 19 cents.” The intent was to show consumers what was really going on. According to organizers, many consumers responded with, “Oh, I didn’t realize this.”

Still, as Kimi Lee, Director of the Garment Worker Center, put it, “there wasn’t one magic message.” Messages were tweaked based on neighborhood and location, but the core remained the same:

- *All workers have rights and should be treated fairly and with respect.* Despite existing laws to protect workers, many are still exploited under conditions akin to those at the earliest part of the Industrial Revolution. As a result, corporate retailers are profiting from this exploitative situation

- where workers and consumers bear the cost of retailers' profit, lining the pockets of corporate retailers.
- *As workers, we must work together and let everyone know that they do not have to endure such mistreatments.*
 - *As consumers, we can help end this exploitation by showing retailers that we will not tolerate their exploitative behaviors.*

SIDE BAR

FRAMING FEEDBACK

We asked the framing experts at Douglas Gould and Company for their feedback on the frames used in this case study. Here's what they had to say:

"Here, the organization was able to activate the "Teamwork/Respect" frame. The emphasis on workplace conditions and employment practices serves as a good example of shifting the focus away from the individual and instead placing an emphasis on the system – in this case, the clothing retailer and their employment practices."

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Keeping the Story in the Spotlight

The successful media efforts of this campaign were built upon *solid relationships with reporters*. The Garment Worker Center, Sweatshop Watch and others got to know reporters by:

- **Contacting those who had previously written about their work.**
- The organizations made sure to **provide materials when needed**, such as interviews with garment workers, and followed up with any leads.
- The Center **pitched several story angles** to reporters each time, and as a result, reporters trusted their efforts to find a compelling angle for the stories.

During the three-year campaign, organizers also offered *exclusive stories* to several outlets as means of relationship building. Reporters enjoy the chance to uncover a new story. However, choose exclusives wisely, as they may preempt relationships with other media outlets, or a story's release may become solely dependent on one outlet.

Media coverage begets more media coverage. Once a story piques the attention of mainstream viewers, news outlets, contrary to popular belief, want to cover the story. Having fresh angles on an existing story helps to keep it relevant and alive in the media and in the minds of your audiences.