The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in 1911 in New York City killed 123 garment workers because employers had locked the exits to prevent workers from taking breaks. In 1998, government and community organizations came together to assist 72 workers who were kept in slave-like conditions in a garment factory and living compound in El Monte, California. Recently, in 2013, Rana Plaza, a garment factory building in Bangladesh collapsed and killed 1,129 workers after they were ordered to return to work despite visible cracks in the building infrastructure. These events launched movements of garment workers demanding better working conditions and accountability from retailers and manufacturers. Where does Los Angeles stand as the current garment production capital of the U.S. with respect to factory conditions?

**Health and Safety in LA Sweatshops**

From June to August 2015, the Garment Worker Center interviewed 175 garment workers in Los Angeles about health and safety conditions in their factories, work hours, and wages. The alarming findings show the problems in the Los Angeles garment industry.

Pest infestation and dirty facilities run rampant in the LA garment industry.

*Nearly 40% of workers interviewed saw rodents or cockroaches in their workplace.*

Garment Workers often work in dilapidated buildings where pest infestations and dirty facilities are common. The restrooms in their workplace are often dirty and have poor plumbing, which can attract unwanted pest. About half of the workers surveyed reported not having access to clean restrooms and reported rodents and cockroaches as serious problems in their workplace. Rodents and roaches are linked to respiratory complications, skin allergies, and in severe cases, vital organ failure. Given their low wages, garment workers also face poor housing conditions, which often times reflect the same issues that their workplaces have.
Approximately 80% of garment workers did not receive health and safety training prior to beginning work, and nearly half reported they did not have access to first aid should a workplace injury occur.

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s standards, employers have the responsibility to provide workers with a safe and healthy workplace, and provide health and training in a “language and vocabulary workers can understand.” However, most garment workers are operating in working conditions that are far from safe. The machinery and tools that garment workers use require careful handling and if misused used, can cause serious injuries. A faulty machine or simple human error could result in a needle flying into a worker’s eye, injured hands or fingers, cuts, or burns.

There are a number of safety violations within the rundown Los Angeles garment factories which mirror conditions leading to catastrophic, yet very preventable, accidents like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Almost one out of every three workers surveyed reported not having clear access to emergency exits. Some shared that the exits were blocked with fabric or boxes while others reported not knowing where the exits were at all. 22% of workers said their workplace was poorly lit, making it harder for them to see their surroundings with clarity.

21% of garment workers have seen physical or verbal violence in the workplace. 6% experience sexual harassment in the workplace.

Fast fashion results in stressed and mistreated garment workers.

SWEATSHOP CONDITIONS! Garment workers work in heat, and suffer from dehydration and respiratory problems.

Half of the workers surveyed responded that their factories have poor ventilation, and approximately 30% reported lack of clean drinking water provided on site.

Heat illness is a serious issue in both outdoor and indoor workplaces. For indoor workplaces, poor ventilation, lack of clean drinking water and set break provisions contribute to the likelihood that a worker will develop a form of heat-related illness: such as rashes, cramps, exhaustion, and/or stroke. The conditions described fit the scene of a typical workplace environment for a garment worker in Los Angeles- a sweatshop.

The employer needs to provide what is necessary so that the worker can work well and without harm “
-Javier, Presser

No health and safety training and constant stress are a recipe for workplace injuries.
Of the roughly 70% who indicated dust or lint pollution in their factories, many also reported suffering from irritation in their eyes, noses, and throats after working long hours in such an environment. About a quarter of the workers mentioned that they used some sort of chemical when handling the garment.

Not only are garment workers prone to heat-related illnesses, they consistently work with fabric which releases dust, lint, and other chemicals that they inhale on a daily basis- exacerbated by lack of ventilation. Breathing in the dust, lint and chemicals may cause permanent lung damage, asthma, and/or other chronic lung problems. By law, employers should provide protective equipment such as masks and air filters to ensure the worker’s health.

Abuse of the piece rate in the garment industry causes subminimum wages for long hours.

The LA garment industry leads all other industries in wage theft, with a 58% minimum wage violation rate!
Garment workers frequently experience wage theft due to the common practice of paying an exorbitantly low piece rate, a form of payment based on the number of garment pieces sewn in a day rather than by hours worked. Though employers are required by law to guarantee the hourly minimum wage if the piece rate does not meet it, they routinely fail to do so. Based on wage claims that go through the Garment Worker Center, garment workers receive an average of $5 per hour.

With piece rates as low as 4 cents for a single operation it is no wonder that this type of wage theft occurs. Garment workers who are older, less experienced, or at the end of the production line often experience the highest forms of wage theft. Two trimmers, a finishing operation, who filed wage claims at the GWC, for example, received on average $1.90 per hour for their work. The common abuse of the piece rate creates a culture of wage theft in the LA garment industry where employers bully garment workers into accepting low pay based on productivity instead of hours worked. Due to low wages, workers often have to work long hours to meet basic needs.

62% of garment workers indicated working daily overtime hours, but because of the piece rate many are not paid proper overtime. 48% work 10 hours or more per day. Almost a third of garment workers reported not being allowed to take rest breaks when they needed them.

All workers have a right to rest breaks, and employers have the duty to provide such breaks. However, due to the low piece rate, workers are forced to work through breaks to fill their quotas. Poor ergonomics and lack of rest breaks within the garment industry put workers at higher risk of developing musculoskeletal problems, repetitive strain injury, and other physical health problems.

If I work few hours I don’t have enough to eat. That’s why I push myself to work more than 11 hours per day.”
Carmen, Trimmer
In order to address the egregious conditions in the LA garment industry, the Garment Worker Center launches its MAKE LA SWEATFREE platform. Garment workers must have a say in their working conditions and wages by having the right to negotiate directly with employers, brands and retailers that profit from their work. Workers and organizers demand the following:

1. An end to wage theft caused by the piece rate and rest and meal violations.
2. Extension of AB 633 garment legislation to hold big labels and retailers responsible for wage and hour violations on the sweatshop floor.
3. Better indoor health standards that protect workers from dust pollution and heat.
4. Clean and safe workplaces where workers have a right to medical assistance when needed.
5. Dignity and respect in the workplace, including the right to collectively bargain for better pay and working conditions, protections for victims of workplace violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination.
6. Brands and retailers pay a just price per piece for the garments they buy so that living wages and good working conditions are possible.
8. Brands and retailers must make a commitment to make LA sweatshop free.
9. Monitoring committees that are held accountable to the workers.
10. Protections from retaliation when speaking up about a violation or simply speaking the truth.

Garment Worker Center members believe these ten points can improve working conditions in the garment industry and give workers the tools to fight sweatshop conditions.

“The most important thing is that garment workers must unite! Because brands and contractors are united so we need to be more united”

-Jenny, Sewing Operator