

DIRTY THREADS, DANGEROUS FACTORIES:

Health and Safety in Los Angeles' Fashion Industry

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dirty Threads, Dangerous Factories: Health and Safety in Los Angeles' Fashion Industry is the culmination of a collaboration between the Garment Worker Center (GWC), the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (UCLA Labor Center), and UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health (UCLA LOSH). A dedicated GWC organizing and research team conducted field research, and equally committed garment workers contributed to both our survey and subsequent focus group discussions. Our partnership for this study began in 2015 after the GWC completed an incisive survey of the health and safety garment industry, in which a core group of garment workers and organizers surveyed 307 garment workers in the Los Angeles area about their health and safety conditions and concerns. This report stems from our mutual commitments to supporting worker centers and participatory action research projects, and is premised on the recognition that garment workers are experts on the apparel industry. Accordingly, we worked closely with GWC members to analyze the survey's findings and craft effective policies centered in their health and safety needs.

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UCLA Labor Center



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RESEARCH PARTNERS

Garment Worker Center

The Garment Worker Center (GWC) is a workers' rights organization that organizes with low-wage garment workers in Los Angeles in the fight for social and economic justice. The GWC addresses systemic problems of wage theft, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and abusive and inhumane treatment faced by workers. GWC strives to provide a space where workers are empowered to organize collectively for just working conditions in the garment industry.

www.garmentworkercenter.org

UCLA Labor Center

The UCLA Labor Center creates innovative programs that offer a range of educational, research, and public service activities within the university and in the broader community, especially among low-wage and immigrant workers. The Labor Center is a vital resource for research, education, and policy development that supports job creation, workers, and their communities. The Labor Center seeks to improve the quality of existing jobs in the low-wage economy, and strengthens the process of immigrant integration, particularly among students and youth. www.labor.ucla.edu

UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health

The UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program (UCLA-LOSH) is a nationally recognized university-based program providing education, research, and policy advocacy to improve worker health and safety. Since 1978, UCLA-LOSH has been a resource for underserved workers in Southern California, particularly minority, immigrant, and/or non-English speaking workers in low-wage jobs. UCLA-LOSH provides a bridge between occupational health experts and worker advocacy organizations, including labor unions and worker centers. www.losh.ucla.edu

REPORT AUTHORS

The report authors: Janna Shadduck-Hernández, Project Director, UCLA Labor Center; Zacil Pech, Health and Safety Organizer, Garment Worker Center; Mar Martinez, Organizing Coordinator, Garment Worker Center; and Marissa Nuncio, Director, Garment Worker Center.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Los Angeles, which houses the largest cut and sew apparel base in the U.S., is the center of the country's garment manufacturing industry. While a number of recent studies have focused on the wage and hour labor experiences of California's garment workers, there is an absence of research on the specific health and safety conditions faced by these workers in Los Angeles. *Dirty Threads, Dangerous Factories: Health and Safety in Los Angeles' Fashion Industry* is a direct response to the concerns expressed by garment workers and worker advocates and provides insights into the health, safety and environmental conditions of this sector.

Los Angeles Garment Worker Center worker organizers and worker leaders surveyed 307 workers in the greater L.A. area between June and December of 2015. This survey and subsequent focus group sessions with workers paint a descriptive portrait of the health and safety landscape of L.A.'s garment sector. Our findings indicate that the conditions in the city's garment workplaces are deeply unsafe and unhealthy for many of those who make what is stocked at popular clothing shops and department stores. The report's key findings include:

Factories are Dusty, Hot, and Poorly Ventilated

72% of respondents indicated their factories were brimming with dust;

60% reported that excessive heat and dust accumulation was due to poor ventilation that rendered it difficult to work, and even to breathe;

Factories are Dirty

47% observed that workplace bathrooms were soiled and unmaintained;

42% of the garment workers surveyed had seen rats and mice in the factories where they sew;

Factories are Dangerous and Unsafe

42% reported that exits and doors in their shops were regularly blocked;

49% told our team that there were no first aid kits available on site;

82% had never received any health or safety training at their workplace.

These findings point to major health and safety concerns in an industry plagued by workplace violations and marked by a lack of worker protections.



RECOMMENDATIONS

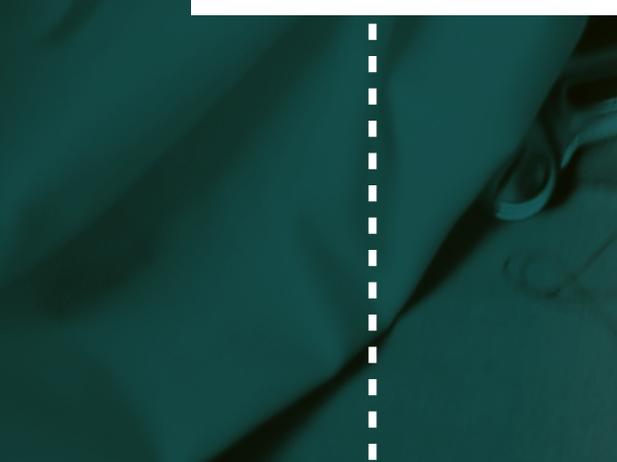
Dirty Threads, Dangerous Factories: Health and Safety in Los Angeles' Fashion Industry recommends urgent changes in the industry. These include:

- 1. Make retailers and brands responsible not only for wage theft and wage and hour violations, but also for the unhealthy and unsafe workplace violations consistently committed by subcontractors producing their garments.**
- 2. Implement and support indoor heat standards for all indoor workers in California, and especially in the garment industry.**
- 3. End the piece rate system. Workers rarely earn a just living wage through this system of compensation. Although the piece rate is promoted as an incentive for workers to earn more by working quickly, it has in fact created new opportunities for wage theft and contributed to an unsafe and unhealthy workplace.**
- 4. Actively promote new citywide standards to fill current gaps in worker protections.**

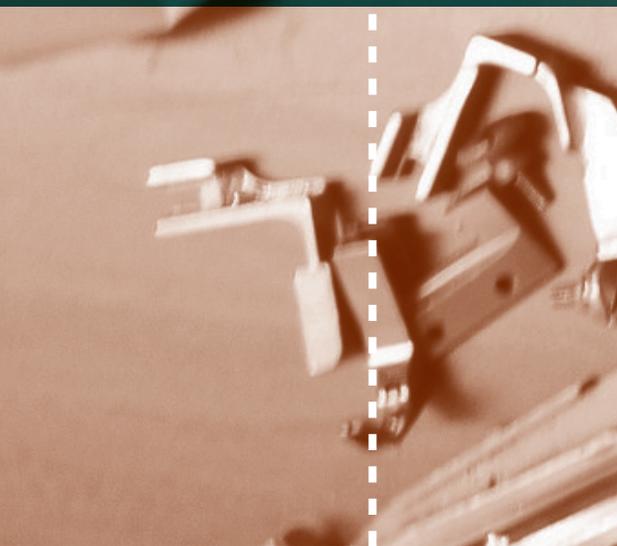
LOS ANGELES GARMENT INDUSTRY

Los Angeles, ground zero of the U.S. garment manufacturing industry, houses the largest cut and sew apparel base (measured by employment) in the country. The industry is eleven times more densely concentrated in L.A. than anywhere else nationally.¹ Though employment in the sector has declined since 1995, it still consists of about 45,000 garment workers.² Today, L.A. produces a broad array of apparel, but is especially focused on casual sportswear from labels such as Forever 21, Charlotte Russe, Papaya, and Wet Seal.

The emergent manufacturing model of “fast fashion” is key to L.A.’s ongoing relevance in the industry. Fast fashion is an approach that moves garments from design to shelf at an accelerated pace, producing clothing for stores demanding low-priced, trendy styles as often as twice a week.³ The fast fashion industry thrives in the city for a few reasons. L.A. has a well-established cut and sew manufacturing base for quick, specialized, and small volume production that exists in close proximity to consumer trends, a large number of fashion company headquarters, and the Asian Pacific Rim and North American market circuit.⁴ Perhaps even more critical, the industry relies on city’s vast population of immigrant workers from Latin America and Asia for abundant low-wage labor. This workforce, despite being vital to the fast fashion industry, is frequently subject to exploitative, unhealthy, and dangerous workplace conditions.



Los Angeles' vast immigrant workforce supplies the needed low-wage labor that allows trendy fast fashion to thrive. Most garment workers make less than minimum wage and work on average 60 hours per week to make ends meet.



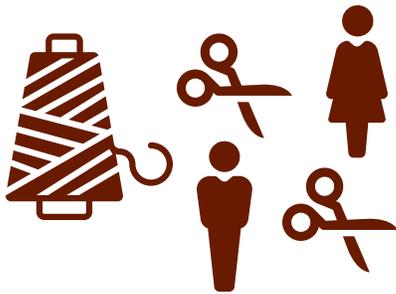
Consumer tastes and demands for closets full of cheap disposable clothes, feed into the fast fashion production cycle. To fill the stores with a constant trendy clothing supply, manufacturers must contract low-wage labor not only in Asia but also in L.A.



Figure 1: Fast Fashion Garment Cycle



Fast fashion is an approach that moves garments from design to shelf at an accelerated pace, producing clothing for stores that demand low-priced, trendy styles as often as twice a week.



Manufacturers subcontract thousands of small and medium size sewing companies throughout L.A., many unlicensed sweatshops, to produce quick apparel for major retail brands like *Forever 21*, *Ross*, *Wet Seal*, *Papaya*, and *Charlotte Russe*. Some stores change out their clothing as often as twice a week to satisfy consumer demand.



Fast fashion retailers and manufacturers rely on cheap low-wage labor in L.A. to produce quick turn around clothes that generate millions of dollars in profit for these companies. Fast fashion's demand for increased apparel production results in unrealistic manufacturer deadlines, which can lead to dangerous working conditions that escalate the likelihood of worker injury.



Why Focus on Health and Safety in Garment Manufacturing?

In 1999, California passed a landmark piece of anti-sweatshop legislation – *Assembly Bill 633* (AB 633) – to guarantee a minimum living wage and workplace protections for garment workers. A study published six years later, *Reinforcing the Seams: Guaranteeing the Promise of California’s Landmark Anti-Sweatshop Law*, however, concluded that the law was largely unenforced by the state labor agency entrusted with that task.⁵ Furthermore, numerous recent studies have confirmed that wage theft, suppressed wages, and poor working conditions are endemic to the contemporary L.A. garment industry.⁶

The 2008 *Unregulated Work Survey*, a large-scale national dataset of over 4,000 low-wage workers, allowed researchers to systematically document instances of physical injury experienced by low-wage workers.⁷ Nearly one-third of respondents (32%) reported workplace injuries in the previous three years, and about 11% of respondents indicated they did not notify their employers of their injury. The most common reasons given for not reporting were fear of losing a job, not wanting to miss work, and not believing the injury was serious enough to report. Of those who reported their injuries, over half said that their employers reacted negatively. Other research initiatives have shown that low-wage workers, including those in garment manufacturing, experience high rates of workplace injury. A 2002 study showed that immigrant workers – garment workers in particular – often worried about back, kidney, and musculoskeletal problems resulting from extended exposure to fabric dust and chemicals and long periods of sitting and repetitive motion.⁸

Workers who operate sewing machines perform precise and repetitious tasks, frequently for 10-12 hours a day, and for six days a week. Garment workers are usually seated at flat, non-adjustable workstations where they rapidly sew, cut, and trim – visually demanding tasks in workplaces where the quality of the lighting varies widely. Apparel workers often work for piece rates, which pay per unit produced and can pressure them to work at potentially hazardous speeds.⁹

Numerous occupational health studies have concluded that a lack of adjustable workstations and unceasing repetitive movement invariably contribute to shoulder, back, and hip injury.¹⁰ One study of former sewing machine operators in Quebec, for instance, found that garment workers had a significantly higher prevalence of chronic health problems than those in other manufacturing jobs, particularly musculoskeletal and cardiovascular diseases—even after leaving the industry.¹¹

And work in the garment industry entails physical risks beyond the ergonomic. Garment factories—in which cutting, sewing, trimming, ironing, steaming, and packaging take place—are sites for a complex array of health and safety concerns. Workers are commonly subject to poor ventilation, intense heat, breathing in clouds of airborne fiber dust, deafening machine noise, exposure to toxic chemicals, perilously unfit machinery, cluttered workspaces, and highly unsanitary factory conditions.¹²

While a number of studies have focused on the labor conditions of California’s garment workers, there is an absence of recent work on the specific health and safety issues faced by these workers in Los Angeles. In light of the concerns raised by garment workers and worker advocates, this study intends to provide insights into the health, safety and environmental conditions of their workplaces.

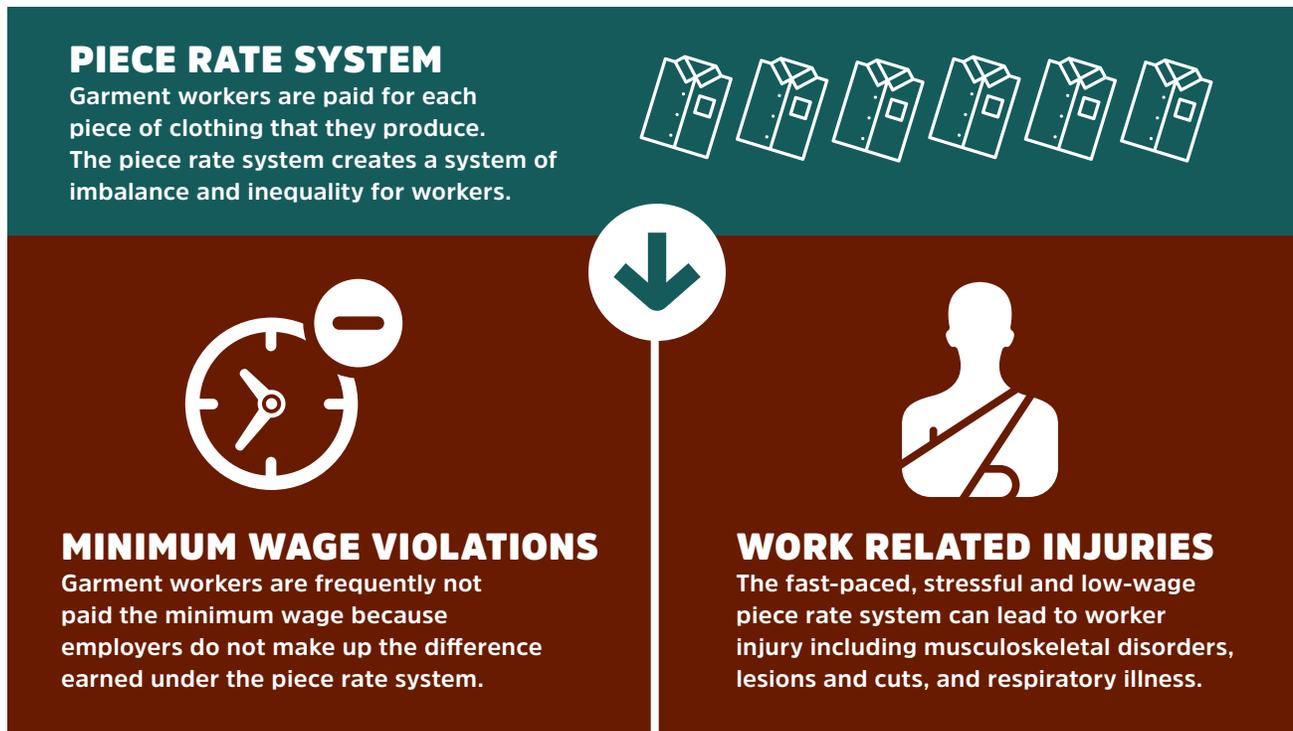
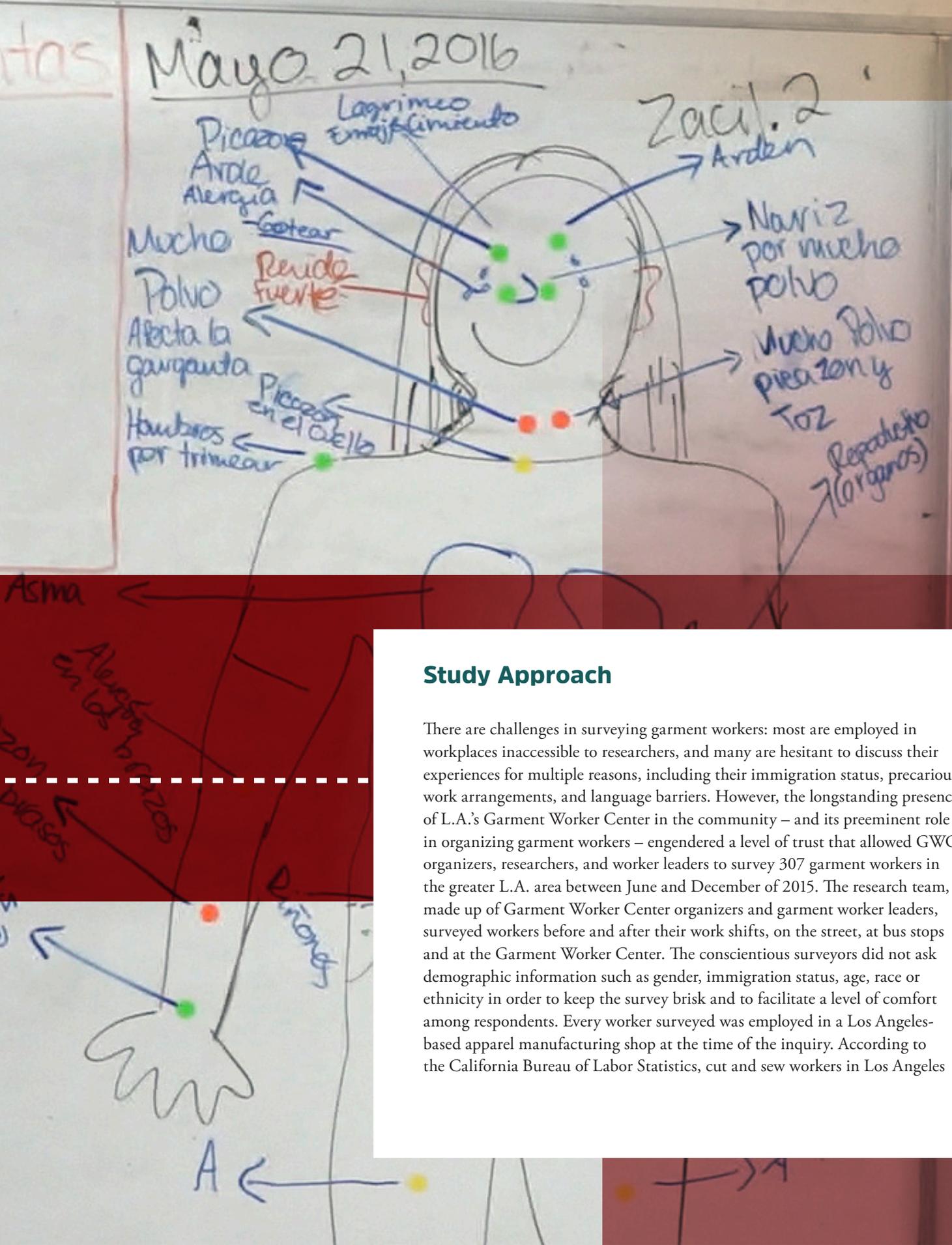
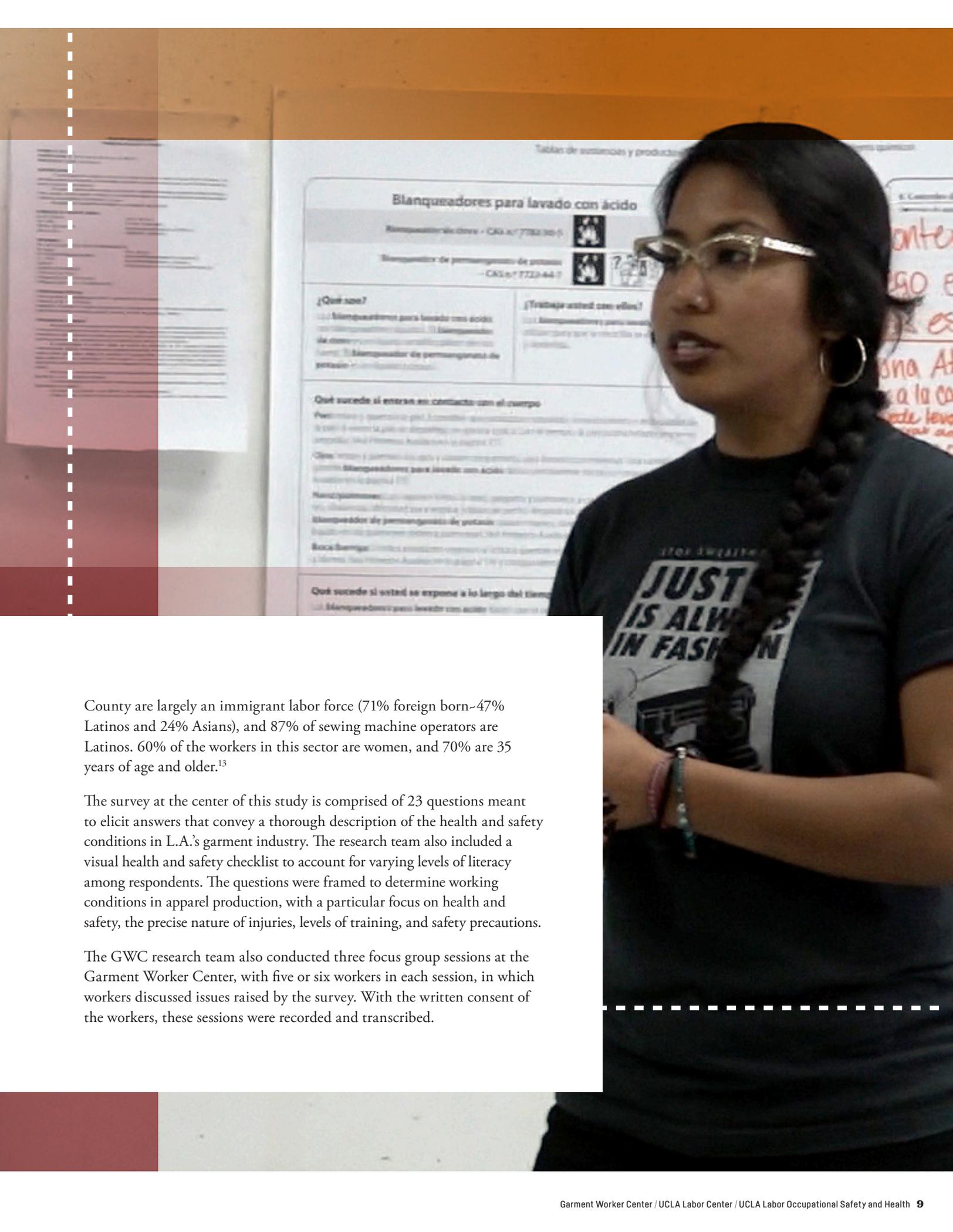


Figure 2: Piece Rate System



Study Approach

There are challenges in surveying garment workers: most are employed in workplaces inaccessible to researchers, and many are hesitant to discuss their experiences for multiple reasons, including their immigration status, precarious work arrangements, and language barriers. However, the longstanding presence of L.A.'s Garment Worker Center in the community – and its preeminent role in organizing garment workers – engendered a level of trust that allowed GWC organizers, researchers, and worker leaders to survey 307 garment workers in the greater L.A. area between June and December of 2015. The research team, made up of Garment Worker Center organizers and garment worker leaders, surveyed workers before and after their work shifts, on the street, at bus stops and at the Garment Worker Center. The conscientious surveyors did not ask demographic information such as gender, immigration status, age, race or ethnicity in order to keep the survey brisk and to facilitate a level of comfort among respondents. Every worker surveyed was employed in a Los Angeles-based apparel manufacturing shop at the time of the inquiry. According to the California Bureau of Labor Statistics, cut and sew workers in Los Angeles



County are largely an immigrant labor force (71% foreign born~47% Latinos and 24% Asians), and 87% of sewing machine operators are Latinos. 60% of the workers in this sector are women, and 70% are 35 years of age and older.¹³

The survey at the center of this study is comprised of 23 questions meant to elicit answers that convey a thorough description of the health and safety conditions in L.A.'s garment industry. The research team also included a visual health and safety checklist to account for varying levels of literacy among respondents. The questions were framed to determine working conditions in apparel production, with a particular focus on health and safety, the precise nature of injuries, levels of training, and safety precautions.

The GWC research team also conducted three focus group sessions at the Garment Worker Center, with five or six workers in each session, in which workers discussed issues raised by the survey. With the written consent of the workers, these sessions were recorded and transcribed.

GARMENT INDUSTRY TIMELINE

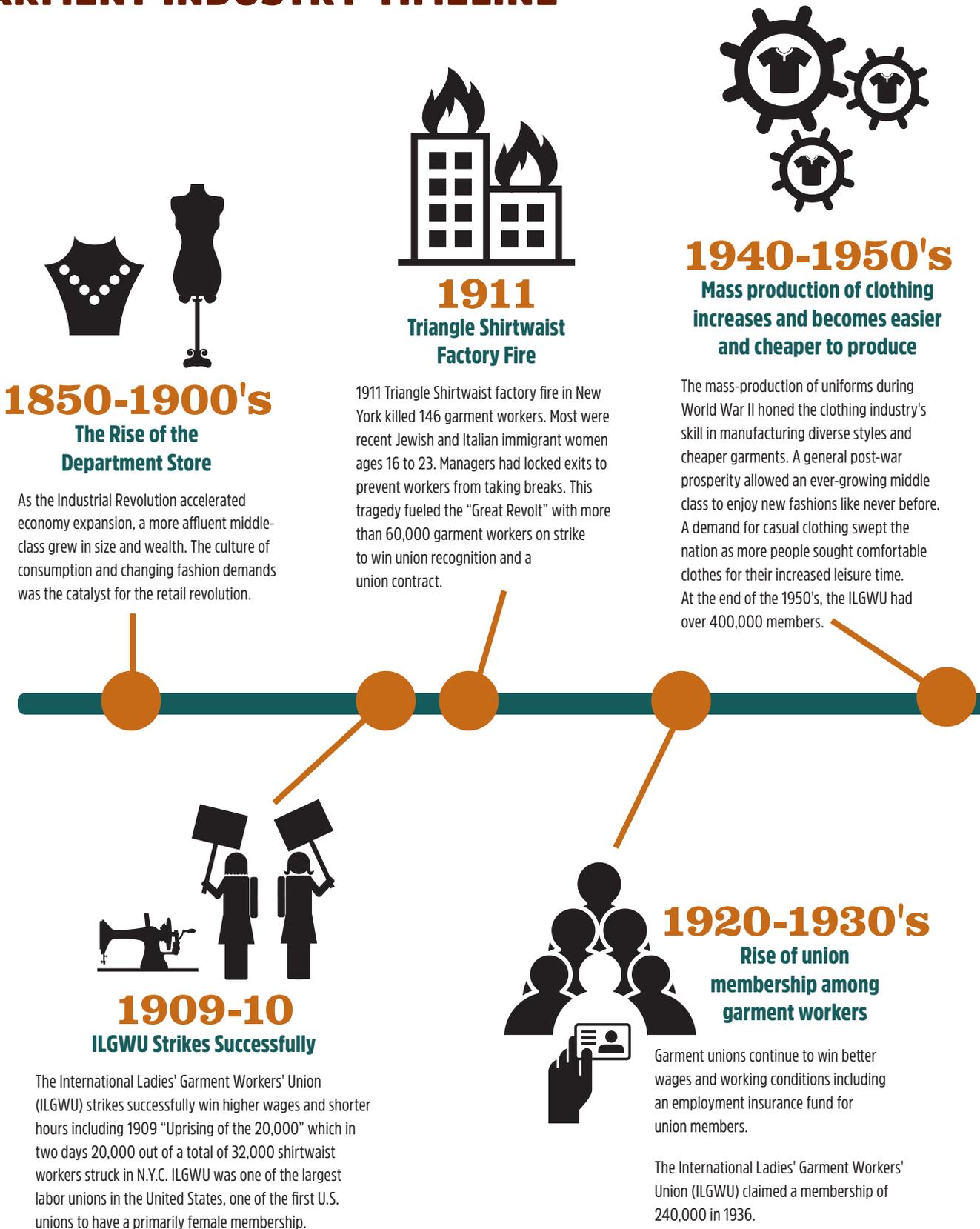


Figure 3: Garment Industry Timeline



1970-1980's

Period of unionization among garment workers declines

80% of remaining U.S. based production has moved to Los Angeles and The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) national membership declines significantly.



1995

Slave like conditions exposed at garment factory in El Monte, California

72 laborers from Thailand are discovered sewing under slave-like conditions in a garment factory in El Monte, CA. After months of investigation, state and federal authorities in collaboration with the Thai Community Development Center raided the compound during the early morning hours of August 2, 1995. This case is considered the first recognized case of modern-day slavery in the United States since the abolishment of slavery. This event launched anti-human trafficking activism and advocacy in the United States.



2005

CAFTA-DR- Central American and Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement is passed

Multifiber Agreement expires, allowing unlimited garment imports from previously restricted countries. These policies further decentralize and destabilize the garment industry.



1994

NAFTA-North American Free Trade Agreement is passed.

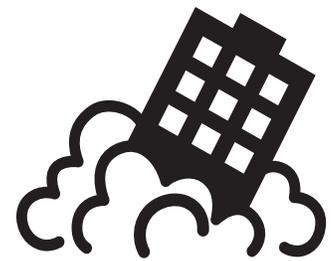
This agreement has contributed to massive outsourcing and industry job loss, suppressed real wages and benefits for garment workers, weakened workers' collective bargaining powers and ability to organize unions.



2000's

Ready to wear and Fast Fashion introduced in the 21st Century

Los Angeles is the fast fashion capital of the U.S. due to its' skilled, local immigrant workforce that produces quick turnaround apparel with a well-developed production and shipping infrastructure.



2013

Rana Plaza Factory Catastrophe

The Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh is the worst ever industrial incident to hit the garment industry, killing 1,134 people and leaving thousands more injured. This incident spurred a global campaign to hold U.S. retailers such as Walmart, Gap, Macy's, and JC Penney responsible for the health and safety and working conditions of workers in supply factories.

WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY CONDITIONS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Worker Health is Closely Connected to Wage Injustice in the Garment Industry

In order to fully grasp health and safety disparities across low-wage sectors like garment production, it is essential to consider the history of the industry. Working conditions for garment workers, who are primarily immigrant women, were notoriously poor throughout the 20th century. While the garment industry in the U.S. underwent a critical half-century of unionization from the 1920's to the 1970's, production has always simultaneously taken place in informal and non-union factories with tenuous labor conditions. Over a century after the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City – in which 146 garment workers died because factory exits were routinely locked to prevent workers from stealing or taking breaks – conditions are not profoundly different today. In 1995, for example, government and community organizations collaborated to assist 72 workers kept in slave-like conditions in a garment factory and housing compound in El Monte, California. Farther off, an eight-story apparel factory named Rana Plaza in Bangladesh collapsed and killed 1,129 workers in 2013 after they were ordered to return to work despite visible cracks in the building's infrastructure. Tragedies like these have renewed public debate about garment industry working conditions and empowered global movements of workers demanding accountability from retailers and manufacturers. And gathering the health and safety conditions of workers in Los Angeles, the national capital of garment production, is integral to understanding the conditions of garment workers everywhere.

Garment production in Los Angeles is primarily arranged around a piece rate system that compels employees to work as quickly as physically possible to produce as many low-priced pieces as they can, and thus theoretically maximize their earnings. Federal and state laws stipulate that if employers are paying by the piece, the total compensation must equal or supersede the minimum wage. However, a number of studies conducted on wage theft and wage and hour violations in the garment industry have documented the enduring fact that garment workers are frequently paid below the minimum wage, and employers are rarely either cited or fined.¹⁴

Further, the GWC has documented cases in which workers reach the minimum wage at the given piece rate, and employers then lower the piece rate to avoid fully paying them. Based on wage claims processed through the GWC, garment workers earn an average of \$5.15 per hour. These severely sub-minimum wages are a direct result of piece rate system abuses. Minimum wage violation is only one of a constellation of illegal labor practices ingrained in the apparel industry. In September, 2016, for example, the California Labor Commissioner's Office fined 18 illegal, unregistered garment businesses over \$682,000 for failing to have workman's compensation insurance, keep employee payroll records, or be legally registered with the state – basic requirements to function as a business in California.¹⁵





In 2015, the U.S. Department of Labor investigated 13 factories in Los Angeles that produced clothing for YN Apparel, a manufacturer for Ross Stores. The DOL found that workers received, on average, \$5-6 an hour, and determined that the low wages of these garment workers followed from the low contract rates that Ross paid YN Apparel for production. In the last half-decade, the department's Southern California Wage and Hour division has completed over 1,000 investigations into the region's garment industry, many of which similarly revolve around the practice of paying workers sub-minimum wages through a low piece rate in order to accommodate unsustainable contract rates imposed by retailers.¹⁶ Most recently, in November 2016, the U.S. Department of Labor issued findings that stated an 85% rate of violation of federal wage and hour laws in Los Angeles garment factories. The Department named Forever 21, Ross, and TJ Maxx as the most frequent brands made by the violating contractors.¹⁷

In the apparel industry, low wages are intimately connected to health and safety violations. Fast fashion demand for increased apparel production results in unrealistic manufacturer deadlines, which can lead to dangerous working conditions that escalate the likelihood of worker injury. Studies have shown that workers who are paid a piece rate are injured at work more often than those who receive a set salary, as they take more risks and fewer breaks to augment low wages. Predictably, piece rate workers have higher rates of long-term musculoskeletal disorder and severe disability than those with salary pay.¹⁸ There are, in other words, unambiguous signs that wage and work conditions directly impact the well-being and physical health of workers.¹⁹

Dust, Heat and Ventilation

Workers are perpetually exposed to dust in garment factories. As they handle and sew fabrics, lint and other small particles are released into the air and into their lungs. Cotton dust is also present during fabric cutting, weaving and knitting.²⁰ Textile and garment workers are thus exposed to a form of dust that contains endotoxins, contaminants and bacteria that can lead to serious respiratory impairments and diseases like asthma, bronchitis, and other more acute and chronic conditions such as byssinosis (“brown lung disease”).²¹ Garment factory workstations are commonly snowed over with a film of cotton dust, and researchers have persistently demonstrated the relationship between garment work, endotoxin exposure, and higher levels of respiratory illness, including some forms that can go undiagnosed.²²

71.8% of surveyed workers observed that their factories were brimming with dust, and 59.5% reported excessive dust and heat following from poor ventilation. In focus group sessions, many expressed concern for their health due to dust exposure, and noted that they typically had to find their own protective methods – even using scraps of fabric as masks. Workers also complained of burning, teary eyes and compromised vision from long hours of exposure. While some wore glasses to protect their eyes, others did not believe it helped. One worker shared their experience:

“My eyes get so red. It is really sad. All day there is all this dust around and it is even worse for those fellow workers who don’t wear goggles or glasses.”

—*Garment Worker, Sewing Operator*

While proper ventilation can efficiently reduce the presence of dust in workspaces, most garment factories provide either substandard ventilation equipment or none whatsoever.²⁴ Maintaining a clean work environment and providing workers with protective masks has been proven to reduce worker exposure to endotoxins.²³



60%

of workers surveyed stated that their workplace had poor and inefficient ventilation



72%

of workers surveyed stated that there was a lot of dust in their factories

Figure 4: Incidence of Poor Ventilation and Dust in LA Garment Factories



“Where I work, they never use industrial fans or ventilation. They say they don’t have money for that. They only use those normal little house fans.”

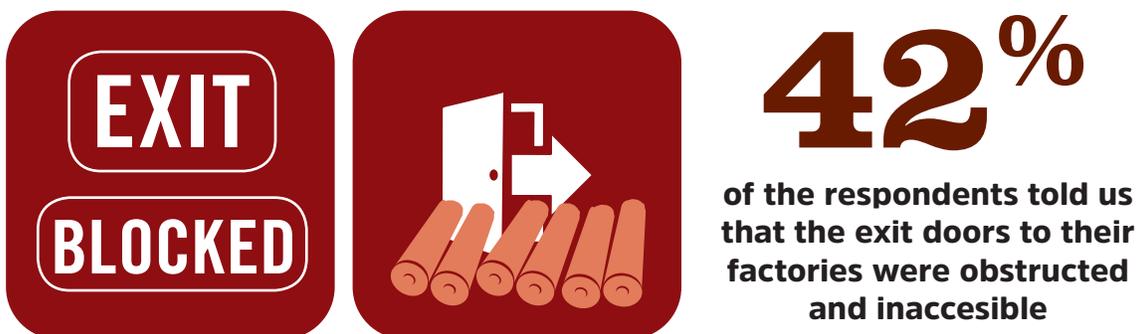
—*Garment Worker, Sewing Operator*

The Garment Factory and its Indoor Environment

Our survey asked simple and direct questions about the workplace environment, encompassing bathroom cleanliness, lighting, the obvious presence of mold and dust, unobstructed exits, available and adequate drinking water, and readily accessible health training. Our findings strongly suggest that a majority of the garment factories where our respondents are employed are in a physical condition that is troubling and do not meet an array of basic health and safety requirements.

For instance, 46.7% reported that bathrooms were soiled and unmaintained. OSHA regulations require employers to establish and sustain a schedule for servicing, cleaning, and supplying bathroom facilities to keep them in a clean, sanitary, and serviceable condition.²⁵ Many interviewees discussed the lack of hygienic workplace bathrooms and stressed how this adversely affected not only their health, but their morale. Many workers also explained that they would sometimes simply forego the restroom altogether, and not only because of their uncleanness, but because they also fear retaliation or pay reductions under the piece rate system for taking bathroom breaks – a practice that can lead to urinary infections and other, more serious, health consequences.

Blocked safety exits and obstructed doorways are a critical safety concern for garment factories. While an inability to flee in an emergency has been the cause of countless workplace disasters since the very beginning of this form of labor, 42.3% of our respondents told us that exit doors at their factories were obstructed and inaccessible.²⁶ OSHA and the California Department of Industrial Relations require clearly marked exit routes and a continuous and unobstructed path from any point within a workplace to a place of safety.²⁷ Workers in focus group sessions were seriously worried about cluttered, blocked exits, dangerously overstocked workspaces, and a general crampedness that impedes their movement about the factory.



OSHA and the California Department of Industrial Relations require clearly marked exit routes and a continuous and unobstructed path from any point within a workplace to a place of safety.

Figure 5: Blocked Factory Exits

Garment workers, especially those who spend years sewing 10-12 hours a day and 5-6 days a week in under lit workplaces, often complain about their vision.²⁸ Almost 1/3 of workers (29.2%) in our study reported the lighting at their worksite as insufficient. Numerous studies demonstrate the obvious: proper workplace lighting, especially for precise manufacturing like garment work, is essential. A study by the International Labour Organization, for instance, emphasized the importance of local lighting for up-close work, so that light shines directly on the task and not into the worker's eyes.²⁹ This report also stresses the need for daylight in a factory setting rather than relying solely on artificial light and advises that attention be devoted to limiting glare, and further recommends that workplaces in which minute, detailed tasks are performed at length should invest in setting up specialized lighting devices and fixtures.

Many of the workers in our study and focus group sessions struggled with their eyesight because of insufficient workplace lighting. One worker said,

“Most factories have very poor lighting, and my eyes bother me every day. There are so few sewing companies out there that have decent lighting; most of us struggle to see and we often end up needing glasses or going to specialists to get medical attention.”

—*Garment Worker*, Sewing Operator

Employers are, by law, charged with guaranteeing a safe and healthy workplace that is reasonably free of occupational hazards. Moreover, employers are required to provide first aid kits and medical supplies commensurate with the hazards of the workplace. Despite this responsibility, the duty often devolves to the worker, and those we surveyed typically felt the need to take their workplace safety into their own hands. While the details of workplace medical plans and first aid programs depend on the circumstances of each employer and workplace, basic emergency exit plans and first aid kits are mandatory.³⁰ Close to half of the respondents (49.1%) reported a total absence of first aid kits in their factories. One worker recounted her experience:

“There wasn't even any alcohol on site when I got cut, not even Band-Aids. I cut my leg with a large pair of scissors and I had to run to the bathroom and clean the wound myself because there were no first aid kits on site. I wanted to go home, but my boss wouldn't let me. So I waited for the bleeding to stop, and there was a lot of blood, but I kept working and then I went home at 6 PM.”

—*Garment Worker*, Trimmer

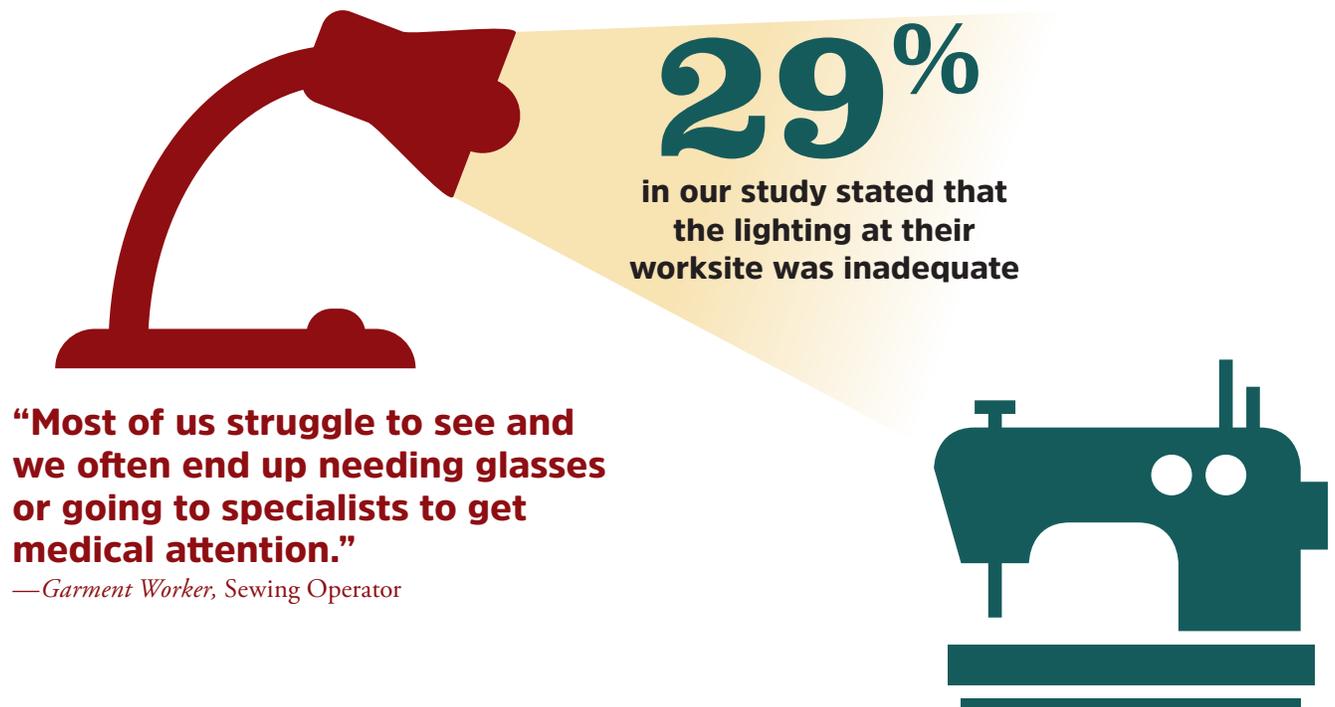
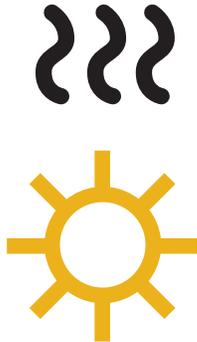


Figure 6: Inadequate Lighting

Extreme Indoor Workplace Temperatures

One of the concerns garment workers most frequently expressed about their workplaces was exposure to erratic temperatures. Many workers face heat-related discomfort and illness, but heat is particularly challenging for those employed in tightly enclosed workspaces, laboring long hours over strings of hot days in a row, with little to no ventilation or air conditioning.



The garment district, in the heart of downtown L.A., is home to hundreds of factories, warehouses, and sewing shops that daily produce clothing with a rapid turnaround. Warehouse-like factories are especially susceptible to extreme heat, particularly during the spring and summer months when clothing production for the fall and winter seasons is at its peak. And despite the emergence of the fast fashion model that produces micro-seasonal collections, summer and fall remain the busiest apparel sewing seasons. In Los Angeles, average temperatures can reach into the triple digits in the very months when garment factories are sewing at full capacity.

In focus groups, many workers reported that the heat was unbearable at their workplace.

“The heat at the factory is so overwhelming that one time I thought my feet were burning, between the heat of the pedal of the machine and the heat inside the shop, I felt like I was going to pass out”

—*Garment Worker, Sewing Operator*

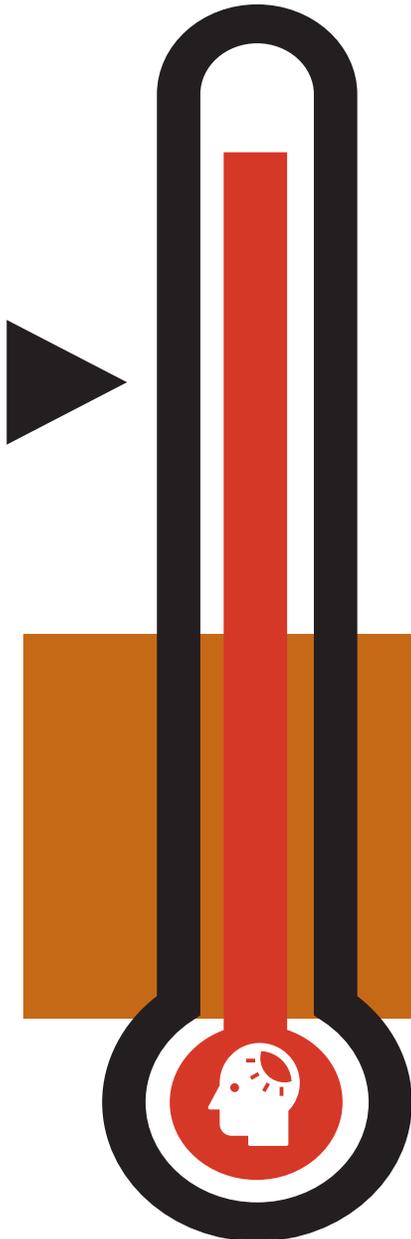
Heat illness and heat stroke can, of course, be exceptionally dangerous. According to one study, serious health issues may arise when indoor workplace ventilation and air conditioning systems are inefficient and allow temperatures to rise rapidly within buildings. And numerous studies show that workers are at risk in hot, stagnant indoor spaces that are warehouse-like, have few windows, and little to no ventilation.³¹ When a worker exerts her body in overheated workspaces out of fear of losing her job, or to earn a better rate, she has even greater risks of heat-related illness.³²

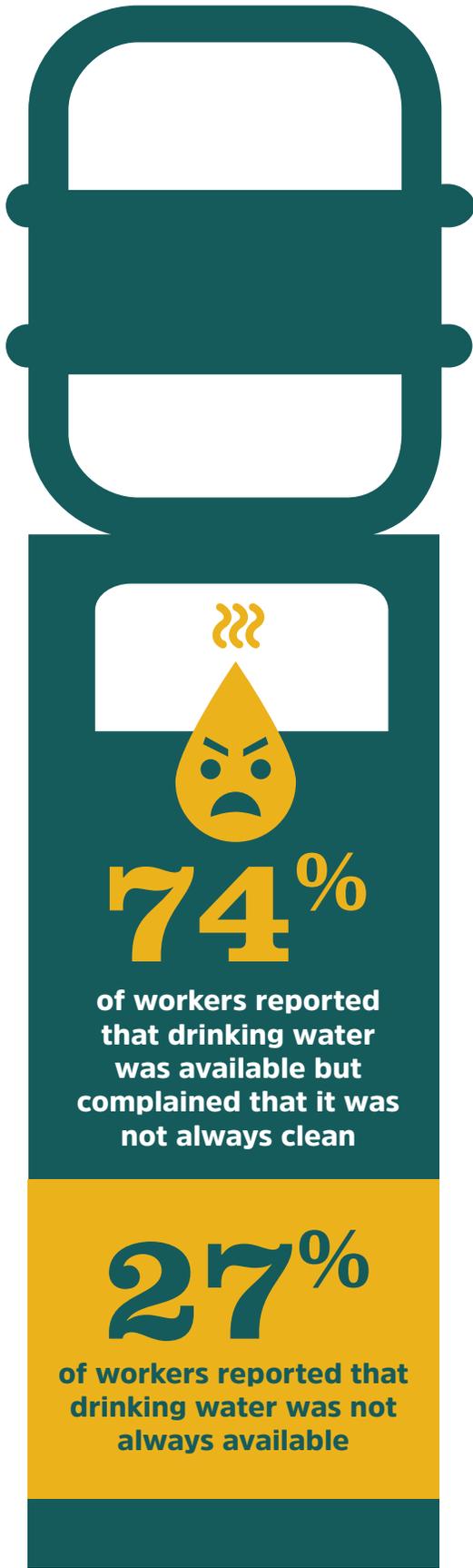
Heat illness impacts workers of all ages and physical strength: heat can dehydrate, lead to severe discomfort, impair cognitive performance, amplify psychological strain, decrease productivity, and inflate accident rates.³³ When workers are overheated, exhausted, and distracted, they may overlook safety procedures. This is a peril for garment workers, who use equipment that can slice and singe, such as sewing machines, large scissors, and steam irons and presses.

High workplace temperatures can:

1. Impair cognitive performance
2. Dehydrate
3. Lead to body discomfort
4. Increase psychological strain
5. Decrease productivity
6. Increase accident rates

Figure 7: Dangers of Extreme Indoor Heat





A recent study of warehouses, in the nearby Inland Empire, that share many of the characteristics as garment factories, found that warehouse workers' most serious health concerns revolved around excessive heat, inadequate ventilation, and water unavailability.³⁴ Simple preventive measures like access to potable water, allowing drink breaks, taking legally-required lunch hours and work breaks, quality ventilation, and pacing and shifting work tasks are easy and inexpensive ways to avoid heat-related problems.³⁵

Despite federal and state mandates under OSHA and Cal/OSHA, our survey found that 26.52% of garment workers did not have fresh potable water at the workplace. Of the 73.5% who reported that water was available, many noted that the water was not always clean. A worker in our focus groups noted that water offered at factories is often distributed in old, dirtied containers, so workers prefer to bring their own.

Adequate ventilation is also a crucial factor in maintaining a cool work environment that minimizes heat-related illness. Yet our study found that 59.5% of those surveyed said that their workplace possessed poor, inefficient ventilation. Many worked in factories that were below ground and lacked windows entirely. Numerous workers told us the conditions were so stiflingly intolerable, they simply needed to quit their jobs – however vital that income was to their families. One iron presser shared his experience:

“In one shop there were 25 pressers and 25 folks who ironed by hand. All in all, there were 50 people ironing. But there was not even one window. You know how long I lasted? Three hours.”

—*Garment Worker, Presser*

Some described operating heavy machinery while on the verge of fainting. Many garment workers explained that they bring their own fans to be slightly cooler, but others could not afford them and were compelled to tolerate extreme heat.

“Sometimes there is water available at the factory but it is so dirty that I never drink it. I have to bring my own water to work, especially during the summer when it is so hot working inside.”

—*Garment Worker, Trimmer*

Figure 8: Availability of Clean Drinking Water



Figure 9: Prevalence of Dirty Bathrooms



49%
of the respondents said that there were no first aid kits in their factories

Figure 10: Access to First Aid Kits

Disease Vectors and Pests

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), there are significant human health concerns that follow from the presence of dust mites, cockroaches, rodents, and animals in the home or workplace, as these pests can act as vectors for a wide range of diseases and health problems. Cockroaches, for instance, are a source of allergen, which can trigger asthma, while rats carry viruses and diseases such as salmonellosis (salmonella) and tularemia. Many diseases are spread by inhaling dust contaminated by rat and mice urine or droppings containing bacteria. And these pests are surprisingly widespread: according to the 1997 American Housing Survey, rats and mice infested 2.7 million of 97 million housing units in the U.S., and a CDC-sponsored survey of two major American cities reported that nearly half of the premises were infected with rats and mice.³⁶

Our survey found that 39.4% of workers reported the presence of cockroaches in the workplace, and 42.1% of rats and mice. Federal law – the Occupational Health and Safety Act – requires that employers implement and maintain efficient pest control.³⁷ Our findings, however, demonstrate a persistent absence of pest control and sanitary maintenance that would mitigate and eliminate the infestation of disease-carrying pests in garment factories in Los Angeles. The implications of these findings point to a substantial and systemic health problem within the apparel manufacturing capital of the U.S.

Workers in our survey were additionally concerned about their exposure to indoor mold, which is directly related to a variety of health effects and symptoms, including allergic reactions, coughing, headaches, and skin irritation.³⁸ 20% of the participants reported that they had seen mold in the workplace.

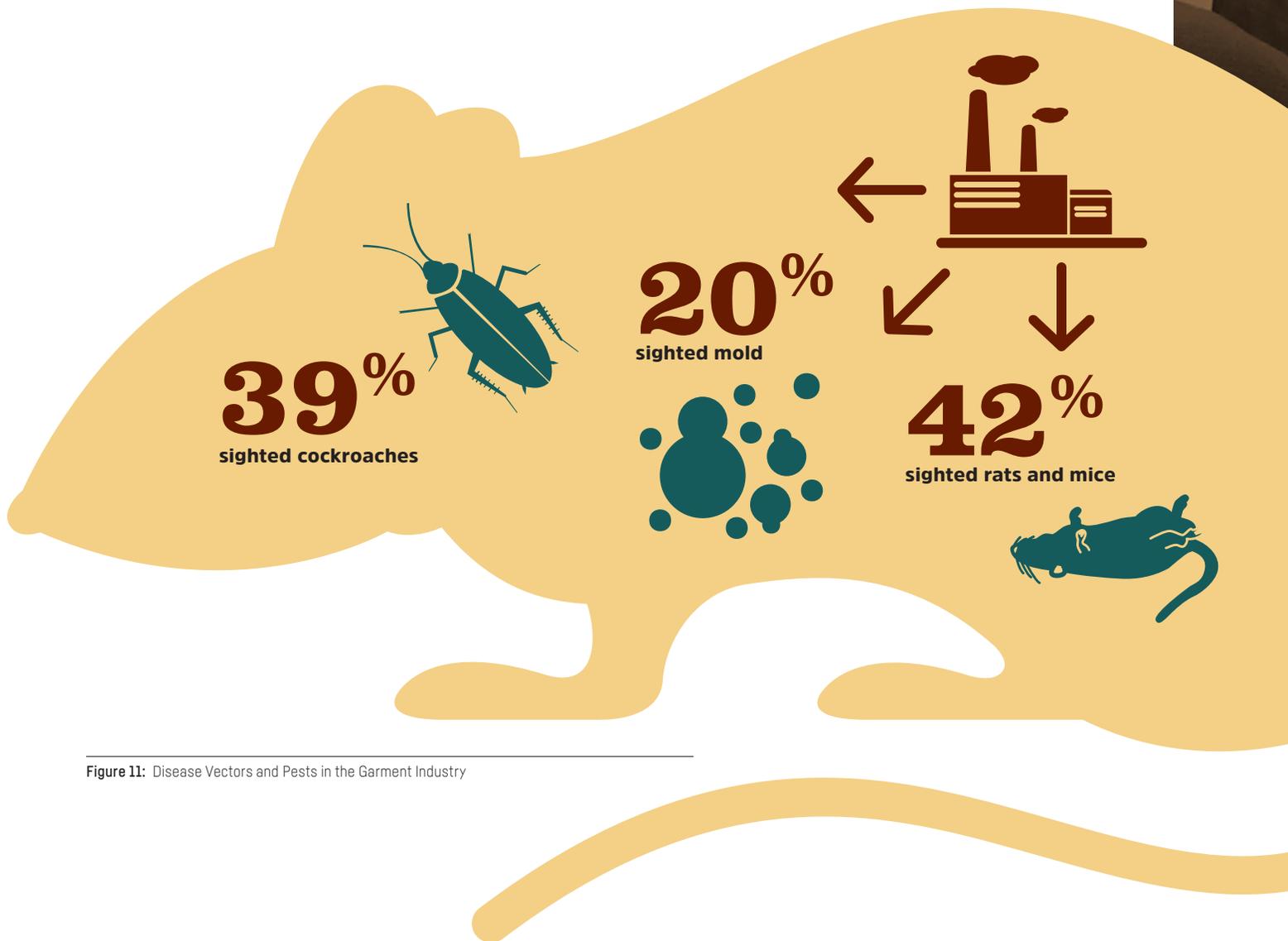
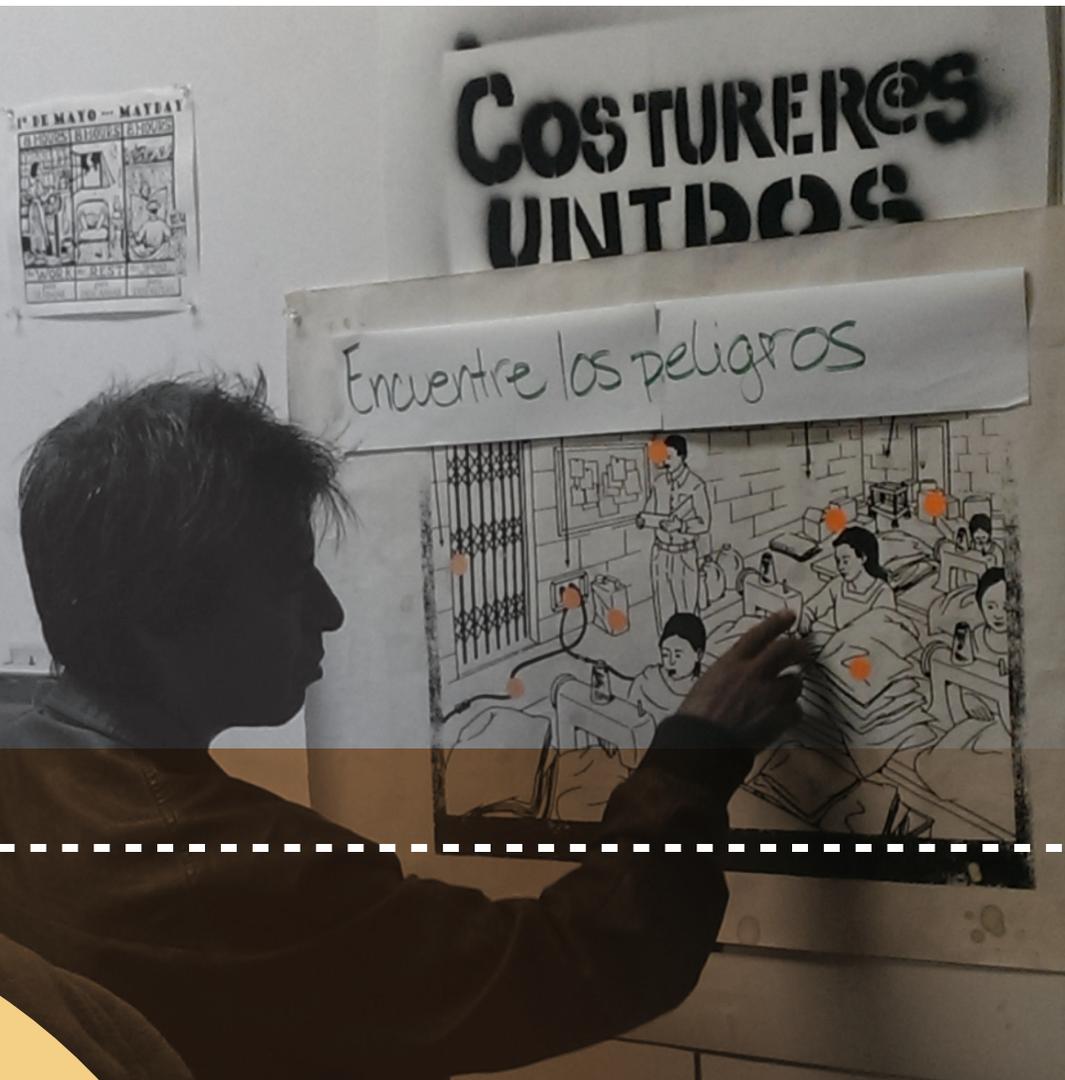


Figure 11: Disease Vectors and Pests in the Garment Industry



Muscle, Tendon/Nerve Pain and Disorders

Imagine remaining seated for eight-to-ten hours a day on a hard foldable metal chair, hunched stiffly over a workstation, repeating exactly the same movements hundreds of times a day. Now multiply that feeling by six days a week and by many years. For thousands of garment workers in L.A., this reality far surpasses simple discomfort: they are high risk candidates for serious physical health ailments of their bone and muscle structures.

Musculoskeletal disorders are injuries that directly affect muscles, tendons, and nerves. Work in which one performs swift, repetitive movement, such as that performed by sewing machine operators, has been linked to higher rates of neurological and musculoskeletal disorders like carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis.³⁹ Multiple studies concur that garment workers have high incidences of musculoskeletal disorders across symptom groups, especially in the neck, shoulder, and arms.⁴⁰

Moreover, the prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders among garment workers, especially sewing machine operators, is not only due to high-speed repetitive motion, but also to pronounced work demands, prolonged sitting, and incompatible machine designs that compel operators to lean forward while working, which applies stress throughout the body.⁴¹ Repetitious tasks such as pushing the sewing machine pedal and cutting thread can likewise cause muscular stress.⁴² Those who use foot-operated machines, which are infrequently ergonomically aligned, can overexert themselves by holding awkward postures and adjusting their bodies too often.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, then, a body of research has been devoted to documenting musculoskeletal problems among garment workers. One study found pervasive chronic neck and shoulder pain among garment workers, particularly those who had worked for eight or more years.⁴⁴ Another demonstrated a high rate of hand pain complaints and diagnoses of carpal tunnel syndrome among stitchers and finishers.⁴⁵ This study also noted, importantly, that non-native English speakers and older workers are less likely to report pain and thus need to be taken into special consideration when changing practices in the workplace.

Allowing legally-required rest breaks, easing production deadline pressure, and providing an hourly salary rather than a piece rate wage can ease, and help prevent, musculoskeletal problems. There are several minor, easily-made adjustments—such as chair type, table height, and pedal placement—that would reduce both muscle tension and general fatigue.

Garment workers are well aware that their bodies are changing because of their jobs, and our focus groups articulated deep-seated concern about how their work will affect their long-term health. They described the toll of years of prolonged sitting in ungainly postures, and podiatric pain so severe they could barely walk from work at the end of the day. One worker told us how her workstation affected her body:

“At times, someone like me, someone of my height, just doesn’t fit at the machine they are assigned. Often our chairs don’t adjust properly, and since it is made of metal, you sit all day on that hard chair and it damages your back and waist.”

—*Garment Worker, Sewing Operator*

Workers in our focus groups repeatedly noted how helpful breaks, in which they could stretch and move about, would be. Nevertheless, 32.8% of our respondents reported that they were not allowed to take a single break in the course of their workday – a blatant violation of state law. Some workers suffer from physical pain so pronounced, they find themselves unable to work, and many reiterated the alarming phrase, “this work is destroying my body.” A longtime worker shared his story:

“I’ve worked in the garment industry for 24 years. I’m currently on disability, but I am no longer receiving any money. I have worked in many factories throughout my time as a garment worker but I started noticing my body change these last few years. I worked at my last factory for about 13 years, stitching pockets onto expensive jeans. On average, I would work for about 11-12 hours sitting down with my sight heavily focused on the jeans. The chairs we used for work were your typical fold up metal ones and because of the way the jean pockets had to be stitched on, we would sit pretty crooked to produce the clothes faster. I’m 100% certain that this is why my body is messed up. My left shoulder hurts the most. This is where most of the pain accumulates. However, this pain trickles down onto my back (middle and lower) all the way up to my left thigh and knee. As a matter of fact, when I got an MRI done, the doctor told me that three of my spinal discs are a little off and inflamed. I knew something was wrong because as I started getting older, laying down flat on my back started causing me more and more discomfort. Now, I can’t do it at all. It hurts too much. If I do it, I cannot get back up; the pain is excruciating.”

—*Garment Worker, Sewing Operator*

According to the GWC’s wage claim intake files, a typical garment worker in L.A. receives a weekly wage of \$300 for a 60 hour workweek, or about \$5 per hour. Only 1/3 of workers interviewed received a rest break, and most were only allowed one half-hour lunch break, even if she worked ten or more hours, in violation of state law. These numbers exemplify not only the magnitude of wage theft in the garment industry, but the extent to which wage theft directly affects the basic physical health and well-being of garment workers.⁴⁶



32%

Experienced more than one injury in the previous 3 years



89%

Reported their injury to their employer



over half

of those reports resulted in a negative reaction by the employer

Abuse in the Workplace

While garment workers endure harsh physical conditions in their work environment, 26% of our respondents reported having witnessed or experienced verbal or physical abuse at their workplace.

One worker, who primarily trims loose thread from clothes, told us,

“[Managers] are always yelling at us to hurry up. They say we don’t work fast enough, but our hands hurt. The scissors we use in trimming create callouses because of the constant movement. Our hands also stiffen up long after we are done working.”

She further described an array of workplace violations, including hiring discrimination, ageism, favoritism, and harassment.

“Many times, the managers or the people in charge tend to give more work to the younger or prettier girls that come into work. It doesn’t matter how long we have been working there. If the person in charge likes the way one of the younger girls look, they give them the attention and work. The older women are often called old hags, and sometimes we are told that we are ugly and useless. They humiliate and laugh at our expense.”

–*Garment Worker, Trimmer*

Workplace Training and Prevention

82.2% of workers surveyed reported that they had not received any workplace training prior to, or during, the course of their job. (This percentage is higher than that found in other research; one, for example, found that 52% of low-wage workers in L.A. did not receive health and safety training.⁴⁷) This figure is especially troubling given that workers run complex machines that can vary from factory to factory, and yet are rarely even provided with protective equipment like gloves, masks, or machine guards. Should an accident occur, workers are generally left to fend for themselves – in fact, when we asked if there were emergency plans in place in case of an accident, many laughed incredulously as they shook their head, “No.”

Moreover, nearly half of those surveyed reported not having first aid kits. Given the quickened pace and physical exertion demanded by garment production, that more than three-quarters of workers did not receive training, and half did not have a first aid kit readily available, is cause for grave concern.

Figure 12: Common Injury Experience in Low-wage Labor Markets.

Source: Riley, K. and Morier, D. (2015). “The Patterns of Work-Related Injury and Common Injury Experience of Workers in Low-wage Labor Markets.” A report to the Commission on Health and Safety and Department of Industrial Relations, March 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our survey revealed that health and safety violations are entrenched practices in L.A.'s garment industry. Los Angeles garment factories are infested by pests (39% have cockroaches and 42% house rats and mice), excessive heat due to inadequate ventilation (60%), lack of clean drinking water (27%), and clean bathrooms (47%). Further, these worksites are marked by obstructed exits (42%), a scarcity of first aid (49%), an absence of health and safety training (82%), and expose workers to dangerous levels of dust (72%).

The Garment Worker Center identifies as its responsibility and mission to help find solutions to the widespread health problems affecting the workforce they serve through collective action with our members. The following recommendations are intended as long-term solutions to pervasive violations in the garment industry.

Hold retailers and brands responsible for working conditions in the factories that produce their garments, including fair wages and hours, and health and safety protections.

1

- a. Brand accountability through written agreements. Garment brands typically evade responsibility for working conditions by subcontracting production of their garments and shifting all responsibility to the contractors. With bargaining agreements that workers and garment brands negotiate together and that specify their responsibility for working conditions along their supply chain, the industry's longstanding pattern of neglect for the wages and health and safety of workers can finally be concluded.
- b. Close enforcement loopholes that allow brands to remain unaccountable. Amend or clarify AB633 (California's "garment worker law"), which frequently excludes major garment brands from liability for wage theft and allows them to remain accomplices in worker abuse.

End garment sweatshops through indoor heat standards.

2

In October, 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed SB 1167, a bill directing Cal/OSHA to adopt a standard to prevent heat-related illnesses and injuries among indoor workers. The bill, however, does not specify precisely what workplaces will be included in the new rule. As this standard is developed through regulations, the legislature must ensure that the standard applies to garment factories and its workers.

3



End the piece rate system that is detrimental to workers' health.

Though the piece rate is promoted as an incentive for workers to earn more by working more quickly, it has in fact created new opportunities for wage theft and contributed to an unsafe and unhealthy workplace. Based on wage claim processed in the last three years, the GWC has determined that garment workers earn an average of \$5.15 per hour, a systematic wage theft violation that arises from the piece rate system. Further, workers suffer higher rates of injury and physical and emotional stress in the context of fast production demands.

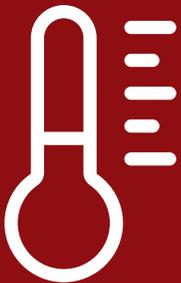


4



Create Los Angeles City initiatives to fill current gaps in worker protections.

- a.** Worker Centers: The city should collaborate with local worker centers, which are a vital resource for workers, allies, and policymakers who seek to advance workers' rights.
- b.** Office of Wage Standards: This office, recently established, should use its funding and resources to support and supplement existing enforcement efforts by state and federal agencies through joint investigations and the strategic sharing of information.





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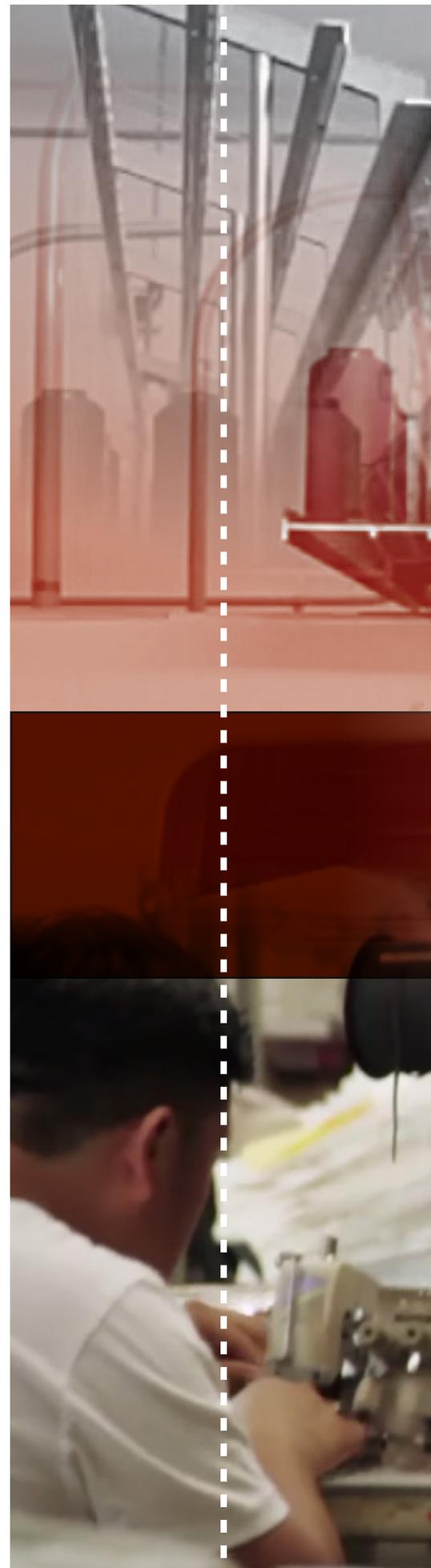
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UCLA Labor Center

