



Garment Worker Center

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# Building a Sustainable and Equitable Garment Industry in California

Industry Brief on LA's Garment Workforce & Industry

**GARMENT  
WORKER  
CENTER** **CENTRO DE  
TRABAJADORES  
DE COSTURA**

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# Introduction

Los Angeles is home to the nation's largest apparel manufacturing hub, employing tens of thousands of skilled workers and serving as a critical center for domestic fashion production. To retain this essential industry, support quality job growth, and capitalize on emerging policies, local government must act now.

Multiple factors impact this local sector. High rates of wage theft continue to be reported by workers.<sup>1</sup> The increasing cost of commercial rent is forcing the industry out of the city, which means fewer jobs for Angelenos. This vital industry now faces a paradox. Global instability—driven by disruptive tariffs and climate-related supply chain issues—presents a historic opportunity to reshore production and invest in Los Angeles. Major brands are actively seeking ethical, stable, and tariff-free manufacturing partners. Simultaneously, this opportunity is threatened by violent immigration enforcement tactics as well as local inaction. The ongoing violence of ICE agents terrorizes workers and businesses, while the City's delay in launching its own solution leaves workers and ethical businesses without a lifeline.

**The LA Garment & Fashion Industry Pilot Program is that solution.** Developed through a multi-stakeholder task force convened by the City's Economic and Workforce Development Department (EWDD) in partnership with the Garment Worker Center and other industry stakeholders, the program is designed to provide the essential infrastructure needed to stabilize and transform the industry.<sup>2</sup> Its core components include connecting workers to employment opportunities, a local production fund, business access to affordable manufacturing space, workforce training and upskilling, business technical assistance, and compliance support—the public investment required to build a high-road garment industry in Los Angeles.

Through this program, local government can support small businesses, grow employment opportunities, and build workplaces that provide fair wages and job quality, all while positioning LA to capture the growing demand for reshored, ethical manufacturing. This brief outlines the path to transforming LA's garment industry into a global model for equity, quality, and climate resilience.



# The State of the Garment Workforce: Experience Without Advancement

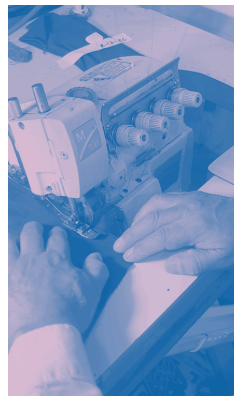
For over 100 years, Los Angeles has been home to a garment industry built by a deeply experienced, immigrant workforce.<sup>3</sup> Now is the time to honor that legacy by developing a program that empowers workers and establishes a high-road industry for the century ahead.

## Workforce Statistics

- **Demographics:** The workforce is 56% female, 44% male. 63% of workers are over the age of 45 years.<sup>4</sup> Of the 90% of workers who are foreign born,<sup>5</sup> 49% originate from Mexico and 48% from Guatemala.<sup>6</sup> 72% of workers do not have a high school education.<sup>7</sup>
- **Experience:** LA garment workers have an average of 21 years of experience.<sup>8</sup>
- **Economic Precarity:** The majority of garment workers live below the federal and state poverty lines. In LA County, garment workers earn an average of \$28,630 in annual wages, and only 15% make above \$40,000.<sup>9</sup>

## Roles in the industry include:

- Single-needle, double-needle, overlock, & coverstitch sewing machine operator
- Trimmer
- Packager/packing
- Sample maker
- Cutter
- Production management
- Alterations and tailoring



These roles reflect a deeper structural challenge. Workers bring decades of expertise to their craft, yet these occupations are predominantly low-wage, with no clear career pathways, limited upward mobility, and no structured training or credentialing to support progression. Workers remain stuck—highly skilled yet economically vulnerable. This is not a reflection of worker capability, but of an industry that has historically extracted skill without investing in the people who hold it.



# Industry Structure and Opportunity

- **Business Statistics: Apparel Manufacturing in LA County:**<sup>10</sup>
  - 1,371 apparel manufacturing businesses
  - 18,408 apparel manufacturing employees
- **Total Economic Impact of Fashion Sector in LA County:**<sup>11</sup>
  - \$4.9 Billion labor income
  - \$9.7 Billion direct gross value added
  - \$1.8 Billion tax revenue

The garment industry in Los Angeles is largely comprised of small businesses, a structure that has long contributed to instability, limited oversight, and weak accountability. The prevalence of subcontracting and short-term production arrangements can obscure responsibility for labor standards, creating layers of separation between brands and workers. In this environment, workers—the majority of whom are immigrants with deep expertise—often struggle to navigate labor law enforcement and assert their rights, leaving them vulnerable to **wage theft** and exploitation.

This context underscores the urgent need for accessible, **culturally responsive resources** that meet workers where they are. Workers need clear pathways to understand their rights, access training and certification programs, and pursue opportunities—including opening their own compliant businesses. By investing in these supports, the city can help transform a fragmented and often precarious industry into one where worker expertise is valued, protected, and advanced.



# Barriers to Equity

While we know more workers are now paid by the hour, many still face precarious conditions, with piece-rate pay persisting illegally. The garment industry's long history of wage theft continues today, with **violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act found in 80% of the Department of Labor's Wage and Division investigations** in cut and sew production<sup>12</sup>. Employers routinely deny minimum wage, overtime, and sick leave. And with an estimated two unregistered factories for every registered one, this vital industry remains largely in the shadows. The combination of pandemic closures, the rapid displacement of factories from the historic garment district by luxury developments and changes to land use have created a volatile landscape where job loss, wage insecurity, and non-compliance—often unintentional, stemming from complex registration barriers and a lack of institutional knowledge—remain constant threats.

## **Recent ICE presence across the city has added to these challenges.**

Heightened fear of deportation and retaliation can deter workers from reporting wage theft or other violations, even when exploitation occurs. In an industry that relies heavily on immigrant labor, this enforcement climate limits accountability for employers who engage in exploitative practices. These are structural barriers to enforcement, rooted in the risks workers face when engaging with government agencies.

Advancing worker equity requires programs that address these realities. Support services must be linguistically accessible, located in trusted community spaces, and designed to accommodate workers' daily constraints, including concerns about safety when traveling to job sites and service centers. For businesses, support services must address compliance and help business owners navigate complex and unfamiliar processes.



# The Path to Good Jobs: Progress and Unfinished Work

The historic passage of **SB62, the Garment Worker Protection Act (2021)**, was a landmark victory born directly from the data and testimony of LA's garment workforce.<sup>13</sup> This law dismantled the legal foundation of systemic exploitation by:

- **Eliminating the piece-rate pay system** that trapped workers in subminimum wages, where earning \$4-\$7 an hour was the norm.
- **Establishing brand liability** to hold major fashion brands and retailers at the top of the supply chain jointly responsible for unpaid wages, regardless of layers of subcontracting.

SB62 was a critical step toward justice, moving the industry away from its worst abuses. The Garment Worker Center's ongoing work is reflected in a strong partnership with the California Labor Commissioner's Office to enforce the law and recover stolen wages.

Yet SB62 alone is not enough. The industry still falls short of providing workers with livable wages, clearly defined career pathways, meaningful training, opportunities for upward mobility, and safe working conditions. While the law addressed foundational exploitation, the work of building an industry where workers can truly thrive—with dignity, stability, and advancement—remains unfinished.



# Climate Resilience: Protecting Workers and the Environment

The global apparel industry's reliance on concentrated, climate-vulnerable regions is a direct business risk that LA is uniquely positioned to address by building a local, resilient model. Brands are left vulnerable to constant disruptions when sourcing from regions hit by extreme heat, floods, and typhoons (e.g., Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam). The International Accord for Health & Safety is now adding legally binding rules to protect workers from extreme heat abroad, turning climate change into a direct liability for offshore production. LA's Garment Industry could be positioned to take advantage of businesses looking to avoid supply chain disruptions, but it will require investment.

- **The "Degrowth" Opportunity:** As some brands explore growing revenue without producing more volume—through resale, repair, and higher-value items—LA's workforce can lead. This shift elevates manufacturing, requiring skilled labor for quality, customization, and repair—precisely the high-value skills found in LA. Developing services like garment repair and restoration is a direct path to climate resilience and higher-wage jobs. California is already leading the nation with the first Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) program requiring garment producers to take responsibility for textile waste and manage collection, repair, and recycling of textiles.<sup>14</sup>
- **Investing in a Green Capacity:** A skilled, local manufacturing base is a critical green infrastructure. It enables a circular economy, reduces waste, and promotes sustainable practices. However, this potential is overlooked by both public and private funders who prioritize other sectors, failing to see garment manufacturing as the sustainable industry it can and must become.



# Opportunities to Improve the Industry

Enforcement alone is not enough. We must proactively help businesses achieve compliance by uplifting initiatives like **The Alliance for Responsible Apparel Manufacturing (ARAMP)**.<sup>15</sup>

ARAMP is a groundbreaking coalition dedicated to transforming LA's garment industry into a sustainable, ethical, and worker-centered sector. ARAMP bridges the gap between ethical garment manufacturers and institutional purchasers, ensuring fair labor practices, environmental sustainability, and community well-being. By connecting high-road factories with institutions committed to ethical sourcing, ARAMP creates a transparent supply chain that empowers workers, supports ethical businesses, and sets new standards for the industry.

The LA Garment and Fashion Industry program works hand in hand with ARAMP by:

- **Supporting businesses that are paying fair wages** to grow their businesses and offer more jobs to local Angelenos.
- **Providing direct funds to businesses that have demonstrated transparency in their practices**, been approved through ARAMP's rigorous application process, granted access for workers to be trained on their rights and program requirements, and are subject to ongoing monitoring by workers and local organizations.



# Model Program in Support of New York City's Garment District: Midtown Made Program

In August of 2025, the New York City Council approved the Midtown South Mixed-Use Plan (MSMX) that included significant support for their local garment district. **The Council was able to secure over \$120 million in economic development resources aimed at protecting and supporting the city's historic fashion and garment industry** which includes:<sup>16</sup>

- Midtown Made, a campaign and website to elevate local designers, manufacturers, and creative entrepreneurs
- CFDA Local Production Fund Pilot, with over \$1.8 million in public and private funding to support designers and garment manufacturers
- Greenlight Innovation Fund: \$50 million to help nonprofit organizations develop permanent, below-market space for the garment industry and other key sectors
- Tax incentive program (M-CORE) to encourage renovations of aging commercial office buildings in Manhattan to attract fashion brands to the area
- Appoint a dedicated point person from New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) to support the continued vitality of the Garment District

The history of New York's garment industry mirrors that of Los Angeles. Both garment manufacturing hubs were integral to the local economies in the early 20th century. Today, **New York City is home to 7,155 apparel manufacturing employees, less than a third of the number of employees in California.**<sup>17</sup>



# Recommendations

To fully capture the economic potential of reshoring local manufacturing, protecting garment workers, and building a climate-resilient industry, the Los Angeles City Council must act on the recommendations of its own Garment Industry Task Force by **fully implementing the LA Garment & Fashion Industry Pilot Program**.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, we urge action to:

Launch the full Pilot Program Immediately. The program includes:

1. WorkSource Centers to provide services to workers including referrals to job opportunities collected through the Business Source Centers, phone and computer access, and skills workshops in coordination with external partners. WorkSource Centers should also expand referrals to cooperative models, including the garment worker-owned staffing agency incubated by the Garment Worker Center and other local worker cooperative resources.
2. Business Source Centers to provide outreach and services to garment businesses and coordinate pop-ups in the Fashion District to provide businesses with direct access to training, resources, and compliance assistance. These centers must be equipped to provide accurate, accessible resources and technical assistance to help small manufacturers navigate statewide legislation like SB62, wage and hour laws, and other requirements, turning compliance from a barrier into a foundation for stability.
3. Creation of a Local Production Fund to support local, ethical small businesses and brands.
4. Partnership with the Garment Worker Center to support outreach for the program, monitor companies under the ARAMP program, train workers at companies receiving funds, and seek joint funding for worker upskilling.
5. Securing an Economic Development and Real Estate Position to secure affordable manufacturing spaces and keep businesses in LA.
6. A promotional campaign and website for the industry, local manufacturers and the program.
7. Funding staff specific to the program to manage the program and seek funding for a workforce development component that focuses on career pathways and training.

These actions lay the essential groundwork for transforming the garment industry into a cornerstone of a just, sustainable, and resilient local economy -- cementing a legacy of visionary leadership.



# Conclusion

The moment for Los Angeles is now.

By acting decisively to launch the Garment Industry Pilot Program, the Mayor and City Council can stabilize a historic industry, protect its essential workforce from fear and exploitation, and position LA as the global capital for ethical, sustainable, and climate-resilient apparel manufacturing.

The blueprint is written; the workforce is ready.

We must invest in this high-road future.

The Garment Worker Center is prepared to meet this moment. For over two decades, we have worked alongside workers, employers, and stakeholders to advance accountability, improve job quality, and build economic opportunity in LA's garment industry. We stand prepared to support the City in implementing these recommendations and ensuring that this historic investment delivers lasting, meaningful change for the workers who power this essential industry.



# End Notes

- 1 U.S. Department of Labor, “Unfit wages: US Department of Labor survey finds widespread violations by Southern California garment industry contractors, manufacturers,” news release, March 22, 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/whd/whd20230322-0>.
- 2 In September 2023, the Garment Worker Center (GWC) began collaborating with LA’s Economic and Workforce Development Department (EWDD) to establish a taskforce of diverse stakeholders including GWC members, local, ethical, sustainable businesses, the Fashion District BID, CD1, CD14, the UCLA Labor Center, Bet Tzedek Legal Services, multiple city departments, representatives of LA County, and representatives from the Mayor’s office to learn about and reimagine the local garment manufacturing landscape. Over the course of five meetings, participants discussed ways to strengthen the local garment industry, focusing on business retention, labor enforcement, real estate, and government service navigation. These discussions led to the development of the LA Garment and Fashion Industry Pilot Program.
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- 12 U.S. Department of Labor, “Unfit Wages.”
- 13 California Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Labor Standards Enforcement, “Garment Work in California,” accessed January 20, 2026, <https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/Garment/>.
- 14 California State Legislature, SB-707, Responsible Textile Industry Recovery Act of 2024, ch. 864, approved September 28, 2024, accessed January 20, 2026, [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202320240SB707](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB707).
- 15 Alliance for Responsible Apparel Manufacturing and Purchasing (ARAMP), “Our Mission,” accessed January 20, 2026, <https://aramp.org/>.
- 16 New York City Council, “NYC Council Land Use Committees Approve Midtown South Mixed-Use Plan That Will Deliver Nearly 10,000 New Homes, with over \$488 Million for Investments in Garment District Industries and Neighborhood Benefits,” press release, August 6, 2025, <https://council.nyc.gov/press/2025/08/06/2936/>.
- 17 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Apparel Manufacturing: NAICS 315.”
- 18 Garment Worker Center and EWDD Task Force, 2023.

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