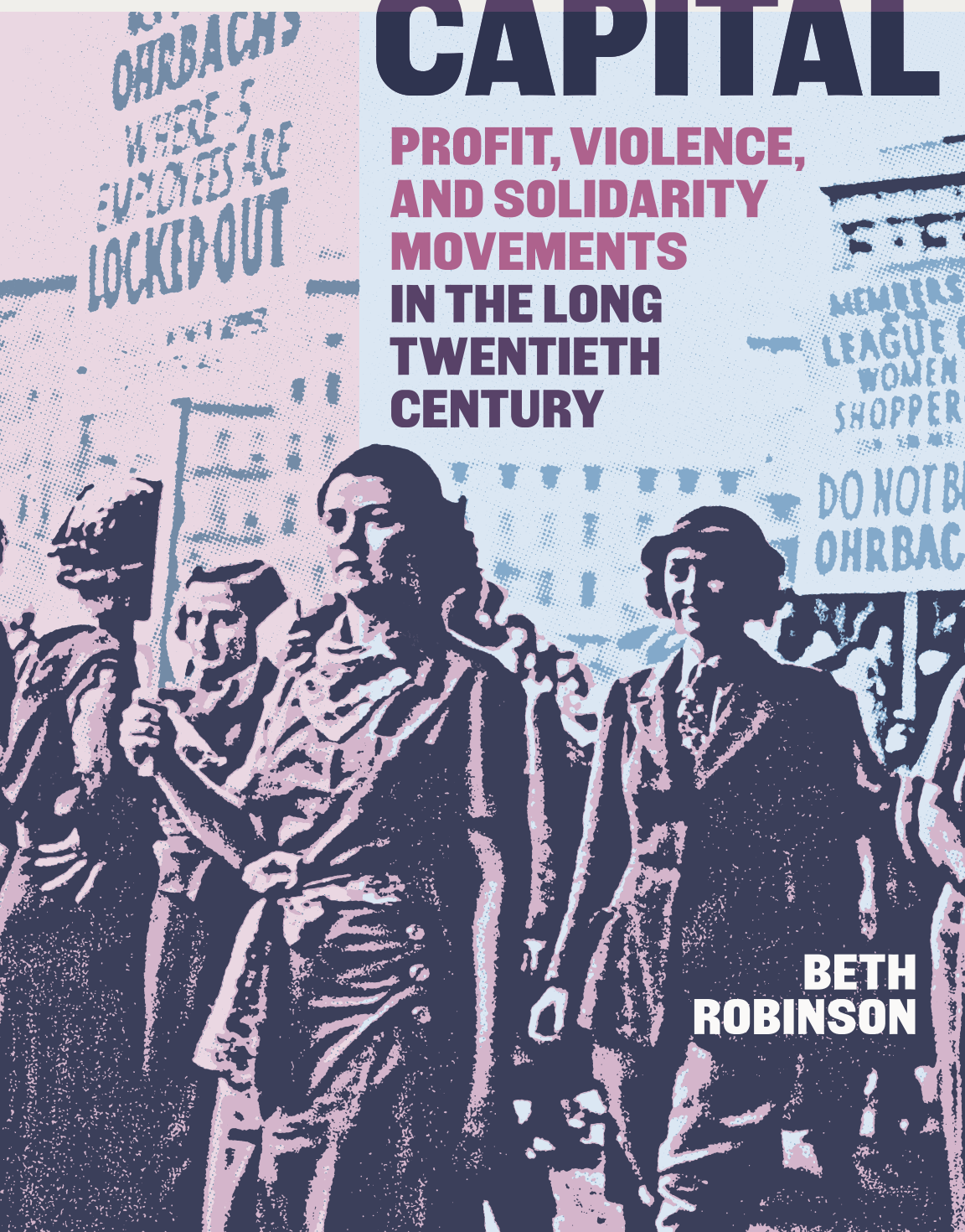


SWEATSHOP CAPITAL

**PROFIT, VIOLENCE,
AND SOLIDARITY
MOVEMENTS
IN THE LONG
TWENTIETH
CENTURY**

**BETH
ROBINSON**



SWEATSHOP CAPITAL



BUY

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LONG TWENTIETH
CENTURY**

DUKE

Beth Robinson

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Cover art: League of Women Shoppers picket outside
Ohrbach's Department Store during the 1934 strike.
Courtesy of Nora Mitchell Sanborn.

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ABBREVIATIONS

FKP · Florence Kelley Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library

FMC · Fromkin Memorial Collection, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI

JLOP · Jessie Lloyd O'Connor Papers, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA

LFPC · Lectures of Frances Perkins Collection, Kheel Center Labor and Management Microfilm Collections, Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

LWSP · League of Women Shoppers Papers, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA

MCBP · Mary Cornelia Barker Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University

NCLR · National Consumers' League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC

PWTUL · Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and Its Principal Leaders, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

RCLM · Records of the Consumers' League of Massachusetts, 1891–1955, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

WGRPC · Walter Goldwater Radical Pamphlet Collection, Special Collections Library, Peter J. Shields Library, University of California-Davis, Davis, CA

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is about the immense, often-unseen labor that is behind every production. I am deeply grateful to the extraordinary network of people who helped me as I tried to make sense of this history. I will never know most of them—the workers who manufactured my computer, or who sewed my clothes, or who cleaned my conference hotel room—but this book would not exist without them, and I hope that it honors their work.

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This book was born out of my own work as an anti-sweatshop activist, and I have enormous appreciation for my friends in the struggle. My thanks to Dana Schultz, Kevin Suemnicht, Kyle Schulz, Kristin McCrory, Brian Averill, Jay Burseth, Dawson Barrett, and others who worked on the “Sweat-Free UWM” campaign. Their creativity, tenacity, and nerve pushed me to write our experiences into a long trajectory of labor activism. Their continued work as teachers and organizers is a testament to the transformative experience of campus activism. I am also grateful to Ann Zielke, Trevor Smith, and Lindsey Resnikoff for helping me think deeply about solidarity and working-class histories.

In that same spirit, I owe additional thanks to Jenny Chan, Chelsea Connor, Kshama Sawant, Li Qiang, David Reilly, and the late Katherine Copeland for granting me interviews. I learned much about organizing, courage, and solidarity from each of them.

I was incredibly fortunate to be hired by the Humanities Department at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, where I finished this book. I have learned and continue to learn so much from my students, and it is a pleasure to work with them. I am also particularly grateful to have had senior colleagues who recognize that scholars wear multiple hats: Thank you to Peter Moore, Sandrine Sanos, Robert Wooster, Anthony Quiroz, David Blanke, and Glenn Tiller. Thank you for being friends as well as colleagues: Eliza Martin, Jen Brown, Adam Costanzo, Michael Jin, Chrissy Lau, Lucy Sheehan, Scott Johnson, Kelly Bezio, Carolina Ortega, Allie Kelley, Rory Huang, Bonnie Soper, Lisa Comparini, and Jenny Sorensen. An extra heartfelt thanks to Claudia Rueda, who seamlessly embodied many roles—colleague, friend, yoga partner, and mentor.

The workers and activists in this book all fought to improve their lives and their communities. They also left behind records by documenting their stories and sharing them with labor journalists, graciously allowing future historians (and activists) to learn from their experiences. For helping me find those stories, I am indebted to the archivists, librarians, and student workers who graciously accommodated me during research visits. I owe more than I can express to the workers at the Special Collections Libraries and Archives at the Universities of Alabama, California, Davis, California-Santa Cruz, Florida, Washington, and Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Wellesley, Vassar, Allegheny, and Smith Colleges; San Francisco State, Emory, Cornell, Bloomsburg, and Kansas State Universities; Birmingham and New York Public Libraries; Alabama State Archives; Wisconsin State Historical Society; American Textile History Museum; and Library of Congress. At

TAMU-CC, the Frantz Endowment and Haas Professorship enabled me to complete this book. I am grateful for the assistance of Marti Beck, Amanda Hartlaub, Mari Alexander, and Anji Perez.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my amazing family. My parents, Don and Joan Robinson, have encouraged me every step of the way. They taught me to value curiosity, education, community, and family, as well as paid and unpaid labor. I am lucky to have my brothers, David and Michael, in my life, along with their families. Thank you to my parents-in-law, Phil and Aline Barrett, for cheering me on, asking thoughtful questions, telling jokes, and pouring wine. And thanks as well to the extended Robinson, Adkison, and Barrett families for being so supportive.

I could not have written this book were it not for Dawson Barrett, who always believed in it. He read and edited more drafts than I can recount, while also doing more than his fair share of household chores. My gratitude for him has no bounds. And finally, I want to thank Genora and Henry, who have been hearing for years that I want to finish my book. They are a daily reminder of what is important.

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PROLOGUE

“UNIVERSITY APPAREL MADE IN SWEATSHOPS.” Two decades ago, my friends and I used sidewalk chalk to write that slogan all over our college campus every few weeks. Our school’s bookstore overflowed with branded merchandise, and, like our classmates, we showed pride in our community and our studies through the trademarked images on hats, shirts, and bags. Presumably, few of our fellow students had ever wondered who made their clothes or where they were made. When we began researching that question, however, we quickly reached an uncomfortable conclusion.

Today, the situation is demonstrably worse. Only the slightest curiosity is enough to uncover that the overwhelming majority of the clothing, technology, and household items that surround us are products of brutal, exploitative working conditions. From our phones, to our shoes, to our transportation, we are customers and workers in a sweatshop economy that squeezes its profits from people working long hours, under dangerous conditions, and for poverty wages. Awareness of this horrifying reality, and our role in it, does not have to lead to despair or apathy, though. It can also lead to action, as it did for my friends and me—and as it did for the thousands of workers and activists in this book. The pages that follow reflect a long history of sweatshop workers engaging members of the public, helping them see barely hidden realities, and inviting them to join movements for change.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, college students were often among those who answered that call, and universities were spaces of both activism and education. My own political awakening began in college as the Bush administration was leveraging the tragedy of September 11 into a devastatingly bloody and expensive war, a global campaign of torture, and a crackdown on American protest. I felt powerless, as it became clear to me that the world did not work how I had been taught. I committed to learning more about militarism, sexism, racism, and classism—and how they were connected. I wanted to know what was really going on.

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After falling in love with a women's history course, I interned at a local rape crisis center and decided to pursue a master's degree in what was then called Women's Studies. I began thinking more deeply about power, privilege, and political organizing, and I researched a thesis on women textile workers in the Deep South. My first oral histories were attempts to learn more about my own grandmother's experiences in an Alabama hosiery mill in the 1930s. At a disadvantage because she was left-handed, her coworkers pitched in to help her meet quotas—an act of solidarity from women who were already exhausted from working long hours at intense speeds. In this history, I saw connections to the present not just in these women's lives and working conditions, but also in their impulse to go against the grain and to fight for one another. It made me feel less powerless—like there was a place for me in a proud tradition.

When my friends and I began chalking on our campus about the labor conditions that produced our branded clothes, we were told by administrators that, for legal reasons, they could not pledge to support more stringent standards in foreign factories. Publicly, they brushed off our demands as merely “symbolic” and offered assurances that they were just as concerned about sweatshop labor as we were. We found out through open records requests, though, that behind their strategically dismissive responses were emails voicing great concern about our campaign, which grew to include petitions, mud stencils, rallies, a “sweat-free” fashion show, and a campus appearance by factory workers—as well as all of the sidewalk chalk.

After two years, the administration finally relented and pledged its support. We won, and for several years afterward, the campus bookstore kept a sign on its door announcing that all university licensed apparel was “certified sweatshop-free.” Long after rain and snow had washed our own messages away, hundreds of students a day were prompted to think about clothing and working conditions. The claim on the sign, however, was, at best, an oversimplification. Tackling the misery baked into the global economy was a much bigger, and more complicated, problem than a handful of college students could hope to solve with a box of chalk. We were not alone, though. It was a start, and I was proud to act in solidarity with garment workers around the world—and with other students, at my own school and at dozens of others nationwide.

Among the many lessons that I learned from that campaign was that our actions mattered, even when the people in power said that they didn't. This book, I think, offers a similar lesson. It was born, in part, out of my own feelings of despair as I learned about the working conditions that pro-

duced my clothing—and the computer on which I am writing this, for that matter. One of its themes is the often-surprising power of solidarity and collective action, and it is meant specifically for students, teachers, and organizers—that is, for people who want to learn this history, to build on it, and to change the way the world works. Though certainly not a complete history of American capitalism or of sweatshops, it provides glimpses into four major historical moments (including the present), centering the experiences of workers and anti-sweatshop activists and showing both the evolution of the American sweatshop economy and some of the many ways that people have tried to fight back against it.

The struggle between marginalized workers and powerful employers has long been an uneven fight. It is, of course, ongoing. Right now, just as at many points in the past, solidarity with workers starts with concern and a commitment to make a change. And, for what it is worth, the movements in this book were largely built by people like you and me.

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1999, attorneys for American activist organizations filed three class-action lawsuits on behalf of thirty thousand garment workers in Saipan. They accused more than forty retailers and factories of conspiring to deny workers their basic human rights through indentured servitude, sexual harassment, and forced abortions. As disturbing details about the working conditions in Saipan's billion-dollar garment industry emerged, critics drew parallels to the notorious sweatshops that had plagued New York a century earlier. Sweatshops, it seemed, had returned to US soil, albeit nearly eight thousand miles west of New York in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. During the early twentieth century, labor activism and government regulation reshaped mainstream working conditions in the United States, but the garment industry—and its sweatshops—had repeatedly relocated in search of exploitable labor. In Saipan, for example, though the clothing that they made carried labels reading “Made in the USA,” garment workers were not protected by US labor laws.¹

The sweatshop déjà vu of the 1990s—the Saipan lawsuit and several other scandals—was emblematic of the American garment industry's long history of abuses. Among its long-held practices, now popular across many industries, was a structure that separated retailers from the workers who produced their goods, simultaneously incentivizing sweatshop working conditions while insulating clothing companies from any of the unpleasantities. Instead of hiring garment workers directly as employees, the retailers—for the factories in Saipan, these included The Gap, Tommy Hilfiger, and Target—instead offered short-term contracts to manufacturers who competed with one another to offer the lowest bids. The winning factories were those who could continually recruit the most desperate and marginalized workers—typically young women and children—and force them to work for the longest hours, at the lowest wages, and in the cheapest, and often most dangerous, settings. The working conditions could be

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extreme, and even illegal, but, by design, they were of little concern to the retailers who enjoyed both low costs and the flexibility to move their contracts to other factories, even across borders.

Further fueling the industry's race to the bottom, apparel manufacturing was often a quick and cheap "startup" business. While large-scale operations, such as those in Saipan, might involve massive factories and sophisticated methods for recruiting—and abusing—workers, more basic, entry-level manufacturing required almost no capital investment: little more than a sewing machine, and even that cost could be—and often was—deducted directly from workers' paychecks. Apparel manufacturing also required minimal infrastructure. A fly-by-night sweatshop factory could easily be set up in the back room of an existing business, or, if space was cost prohibitive, workers could just be compelled to sew and iron in their own homes. In effect, apparel manufacturers—whether the factories in Saipan in the 1990s, or New York's Triangle Shirtwaist Company (the infamous site of the deadly 1911 factory fire)—operated as vices for clothing retailers, squeezing workers through exploitation, coercion, or brute force. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that conditions in this industry compelled critics to adopt the term "sweatshop" to describe its horrors.²

In the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Kingsley, an English priest and history professor, first used the term "sweated" to describe London's apparel workers, who rather than being paid weekly or hourly wages, were subcontracted by each piece they produced. This arrangement, in which a "sweater" paid workers a low, set price per garment, effectively guaranteed long hours of exhaustingly fast-paced work—and forced workers to donate any downtime to their employer for free. Horrifying to the period's onlookers, this arrangement is, of course, now the standard for many laborers, ranging from farmworkers, to hairdressers, to Uber drivers. By the late 1800s, British Parliament had formally identified "sweating" by: "(1) an unduly low rate of wages, 2) excessive hours of labour, [and] 3) the insanitary state of the houses in which the work is carried on."³ Working conditions in US textile and garment factories, where workers produced fabric and sewed it into clothing, mirrored those in England, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "sweatshop" became a stand-in for the excesses of the American industry, as well.

The uncomfortable similarities between the sweatshops of the 1990s and those of a century prior sparked a wave of media attention and solidarity activism in the United States, including from groups such as Sweatshop Watch and Global Exchange, which sponsored the lawsuits in Saipan. The

scrutiny also drew feigned surprise, and promises of reform, from business leaders. Two decades later, however, the global sweatshop economy is no longer industry's dirty little secret. Child labor, poverty wages, widespread workplace injuries, and death are routinely connected to a host of household names, from SHEIN and H&M to Apple and Amazon. Revisiting the long history of sweatshops reveals both more consistency through the twentieth century—the 1990s as another chapter, not a return to an old model—and a wider historical lens. For example, we can consider the living and working conditions of laborers in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the early 1800s and in Shenzhen, China, two centuries later—each working long hours for low pay, sleeping in company-owned dorms, and producing goods for American consumers.

The textile mill owners in Lowell deliberately recruited young women to be their workforce, and they were some of the first women in the United States to earn wages. By 1840, the mills employed some eight thousand people, were valued at more than ten million dollars, and drew praise from all over the world for their efficiency. The millhands, referred to as “Lowell Mill Girls,” worked upward of seventy hours per week in noisy, poorly ventilated buildings. Even on hot days, factory windows remained closed to prevent any disruption to the threads. When their shifts ended, the millhands retired to spartan company boarding houses, generally sleeping six to a tiny room with just three beds. These “corporate households,” as historical archeologists Mary Beaudry and Stephen Mrozowski call them, would become common in the United States over the next century, particularly in extraction industries such as lumber and mining. But while housing was undoubtedly a benefit, as Beaudry and Mrozowski argue, the Lowell boarding houses also revealed a “corporate ideology that sought to control workers’ lives without taking ultimate responsibility for them.”⁴

Despite long work hours and around-the-clock surveillance from employers, Lowell workers created and participated in an active intellectual culture through lectures, reading groups, and lending libraries. In the 1830s, they began publishing their own essays, gossip, and poetry in a company-funded magazine, the *Lowell Offering*. Though likely at least partially self-censored, writings in the *Offering* nonetheless touched on the bleak conditions in Lowell, for example by including a tribute to two workers who died by suicide. Lowell workers also began publishing a more critical, independent newspaper, *Voice of Industry*, which featured topics such as wealth inequality, sexism, slavery, the Mexican American War, woman suffrage, and, of course, working conditions. In 1846, one millhand wrote of her sorrows:

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I stand and gaze from my prison walls,
On yonder flowing river;
The thought will rise, Oh, why did it spring
From the hand of its Almighty Giver? . . .
Do they flow to add to the miser's gold?
Or to cheer and bless our race?

Gently its sparkling waters roll,
With grandeur, pride and grace,
To seek their mighty ocean bed—
Their final resting place.

Emblem of Purity and Truth!
Made from thy aim to turn—
To sap the lifeblood from young veins,
And fill the funeral Urn.⁵

Though desperation and misery were front and center, *Voice of Industry* also featured writings about the importance of solidarity and organizing. The articles in these publications were subtle protests, and the women who wrote and read them also organized some of the earliest large-scale labor strikes in US industry. In 1836, more than 1,500 mill workers walked out in protest of a wage cut. In 1845, two thousand women millhands signed a petition to the Massachusetts state legislature asking for a ten-hour workday. Despite mill owners' attempts to control workers' time and their bodies, the *Lowell Offering* and *Voice of Industry* showed that they could not control their minds.⁶

In twenty-first-century Shenzhen, more than 120,000 workers live and labor in the Foxconn campus' high-rise factories and dormitories. After twelve-hour—or longer—shifts in the factory, workers' limited free time is spent sleeping in shared bunk beds, their privacy limited to the make-shift curtains that they hang in their rooms. Sociologists Jenny Chan and Pun Ngai write that the self-contained Foxconn campus “facilitates flexible production [by] imposing overtime work, as the distinction between ‘home’ and ‘work’ is blurred.”⁷ Like their counterparts in Lowell, the workers at Foxconn are squeezed and controlled to produce profits both for manufacturers and for retailers.

The Foxconn workers, who make iPhones, Kindles, and video game consoles, also resist the all-consuming demands of factory work through writing. Xu Lizhi, for example, published thirty pieces—poems, essays,

and commentary—in *Foxconn People*, the factory magazine. One poem, “Workshop, My Youth Was Stranded Here,” describes the unique stress of a factory assembly line with high quotas:

Beside the assembly line, tens of thousands of workers line up like
words on a page
“Faster, hurry up!”
Standing among them, I hear the supervisor bark.
Once you’ve entered the workshop
The only choice is submission
Watch it being ground away day and night
Pressed, polished, molded
Into a few measly bills, so-called wages.⁸

Another of Xu’s poems, written in January 2014, points directly to feelings of despair:

A screw fell to the ground
In this dark night of overtime
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
It won’t attract anyone’s attention
Just like last time
On a night like this
When someone plunged to the ground.

That September, after failed attempts to find other employment, Xu jumped off a factory building to his death, four years after a string of high-profile Foxconn suicides. He left behind a poem entitled “On My Deathbed.”⁹

Scholar Laura Hapke argues that the sweatshop is “as American as apple pie,” and indeed, though certainly not unique to the United States, the great wealth of the American economy has consistently been produced by hyperexploited labor—from formally enslaved and indentured workers onward.¹⁰ Like “slavery,” the term “sweatshop” itself elicits a powerful feeling of historical horror. It conjures images of workplace dangers and the exploitation of desperate workers, typically already marginalized because of their age, gender, race, and immigration status. Over-reverence for its historical usage, however, can stifle labor justice efforts in the present.

American history textbooks generally follow the lead of Progressive Era reformers, using the term to describe the cramped tenements, oppressive temperatures, child labor, and disease of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this narrative, American sweatshops were a moment of historically and geographically isolated missteps on the road to the country's post-slavery industrial greatness. In some ways, adopting this framework helps maintain the term's strategic value, as it can be used to expose modern injustices, such as those in Saipan, as historically out of place. However, today's US media typically reserve "sweatshop" for headline-grabbing tragedies that afflict workers from the Global South, perhaps inadvertently serving the interests of abusive employers. This limited usage establishes a progressive historical narrative—often repeated by sweatshop apologists—in which the United States has overcome its sweatshop problem, while other nations are simply still evolving. From this perspective, sweatshops are simply growing pains, and their critics just need to be patient—and, most important, take no action.¹¹

Officially, the US government defines a sweatshop as "an employer that violates more than one federal or state law governing minimum wage and overtime, child labor, industrial homework, occupational safety and health, workers compensation, or industry regulation."¹² Though this description does not account for the existence of sweatshops prior to, or outside of, US labor laws and regulations, it does establish a clear standard. And, by this definition, many of the country's factories, warehouses, farms, retail outlets, and offices—throughout the twentieth century and today—are arguably sweatshops. Major US employers, including Walmart, Amazon, and McDonald's, have repeatedly been accused of violating labor laws, and workers themselves have openly used the term to describe their jobs. In 2021, for example, New Jersey Amazon warehouse worker Courtenay Brown testified to the US Senate that she worked in a "high-tech sweatshop."¹³

Some scholars agree, arguing that the sweatshop existed, and exists, across industries, place, and time. Historian Leon Stein writes, "The sweatshop is a state of mind as well as a physical fact . . . the sweatshop, whether in a modern factory building or a dark slum cellar, exists where the employer controls most of the working conditions and the worker cannot protest."¹⁴ Book titles like *Sweatshops in the Sun*, *Sweatshops at Sea*, *Suburban Sweatshops*, *Electronic Sweatshop*, and *White-Collar Sweatshop*, if nothing else, reflect the vast practice of labor exploitation—applying the term to agricultural, domestic, and office workers; merchant seamen; and electronics manufacturers. Pointing to twenty-first-century abuses examined later in this

book, labor historian Ruth Milkman similarly describes Amazon's delivery system as a "sweatshop on wheels."¹⁵ Though I am most interested in the through-lines connecting the garment industry's sweatshops throughout the twentieth century, I also look at how the term has been used more broadly, particularly by workers and anti-sweatshop activists in their efforts to improve working conditions.¹⁶

This book examines the pervasiveness of workplaces—whatever they are called—that are defined by marginalization, misery, unfulfilled hope, danger, and a lack of opportunity. For more than a century, these spaces have been built, maintained, and defended by business interests, and they have created massive individual fortunes and vast corporate empires. However, this is also a book about the people who routinely challenged those conditions. Specifically, I examine solidarity movements for worker justice across the "Long 20th Century"—in this case, the late 1800s through the present. These movements overlapped with labor activism, but they also represented something broader, which brought workers together with a variety of activist allies.

Unsurprisingly, throughout this long period, the most desperate workers in US supply chains were often women—particularly women of color and women with precarious citizenship status. Garment workers at New York's Triangle Shirtwaist Company, for example, were disproportionately young Jewish women from Eastern and Southern Europe. In Saipan, factories relied on temporary workers from countries including Bangladesh and the Philippines. Foxconn, too, sought young women, many of them migrants from rural parts of China. As numerous feminist scholars have highlighted, sweatshops, because they deliberately target vulnerable workers, are frequently linked to gender-specific abuses, such as sexual harassment and assault; forced birth control, sterilizations, and abortions; and decreased maternal health. In short, the sweatshop is a tool of exploitation, and it is often an expression of misogyny, xenophobia, and white supremacy—as well as greed.

Workers' allies in their struggles for justice were also usually women, generally with more means and privilege, like the attorneys of Sweatshop Watch. At the heart of these cross-class alliances has been an evolving feminist solidarity, which has, with varying degrees of success, challenged the immense power of capital in hopes of improving the lives of workers.

Women's solidarity in the long fight against sweatshops is the subject of some of the most important studies in women's and labor history. I join some of my academic role models—Annelise Orleck, Alice Kessler-Harris,

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Landon Storrs, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Eileen Boris, among others—in trying to understand this struggle and its significance to our collective past. Though I spent many hours in archives, this book does not offer many big, new discoveries about, say, members of the League of Women Shoppers in the 1930s or the Women's Trade Union League two decades earlier. Rather, it allows readers to see those activists through a twenty-first-century lens—to compare the infamous New York garment factories to today's Amazon warehouses, and to consider how both working conditions and resistance have evolved. Unapologetically, it looks to history for answers—or at least hope—as we confront a host of problems in the present.¹⁷

Anti-sweatshop activists, at many turns over the last century, used the limited means available to them—including strategically using the term “sweatshop”—to apply pressure to industry, consumers, and lawmakers. I examine how each side—advocates for workers and for industry—sought to outmaneuver their opponents' efforts to create landscapes that either brought reform to sweatshops or ensured that they could thrive. This fight, between powerful elites on one side, and seemingly powerless workers and their activist allies on the other, helps frame a narrative of the twentieth century that positions the middle decades as what some US historians are now calling “the Great Exception”—the brief, albeit problematic, moment of recognized workers' rights and middle-class opportunities.¹⁸

However, by focusing primarily on the struggles of workers who remained on the margins during that moment of possibility—which became the heyday of the American middle class—this book ultimately focuses on the rule, not the exception. It recasts the history of modern labor through the lens of the sweatshop, revealing not just why working conditions were so similar in New York and Saipán a century apart, but also where we might go from here.

The sweatshop may be “as American as apple pie,” and the persistent reliance on an underclass of hyperexploited workers would seem to suggest that human nature—perhaps the greed of American consumers, in particular—drives purchasing habits that prioritize good deals, no matter the human cost. At least one study suggests the opposite, though. Conducted in 1995, 1998, and 1999, Marymount University's National Consumer Sweatshop Surveys consistently reflected Americans' desires to purchase ethically produced goods. They revealed that two-thirds of consumers—across all income levels—would avoid shopping at a retailer that they knew sold garments made in sweatshops, and 86 percent would pay more money

for their clothing if they knew that the workers who made them enjoyed good living and working conditions. More than half of those surveyed also said that a “fair-labor label” would provide the greatest aid in helping them make their purchasing decisions. Perhaps little can be drawn from one study, and certainly consumer impulses ebb and flow over time. However, the study’s conclusions may help explain why US business interests have been so focused on crushing anti-sweatshop activism over the last century and why, especially in recent decades, they have worked so hard to keep sweatshops out of the public eye—often behind barbed-wire fences.¹⁹

One of the themes of this book is consistency, whether the use of centuries-old models of labor exploitation, or workers’ use of poetry to carve out spaces of mental resistance. There have also been several significant moments when workers and activists engaged in collective action that challenged the idea that profit was more important than people. Tapping into wider discontent around economic and racial injustice, as well as concerns about the environment, these movements forced consumers to acknowledge and confront their relationships to sweatshop working conditions. They recruited broad segments of society to become allies in workers’ fights for shorter shifts, higher wages, union recognition, and other demands. Sometimes, this meant joining picket lines. Other times, it meant contributing to strike funds. Still other times, it meant using their purchasing power in solidarity with workers in an attempt to “civilize capitalism.”²⁰

In yet another nod to historical constants, workers and activists a century apart also strategically targeted specific, high-impact days to maximize the influence of their boycotts, pickets, and other protests. Early twentieth-century campaigns, for example, directly appealed to an audience of middle-class and elite women by pointing out inconsistent experiences around Christmas. While holiday songs called on all to rejoice, the workers were unable to join in the celebration of the season due to the early mornings and late nights required by their employers. Activists in the twenty-first century, meanwhile, have asked consumers to refrain from purchases on specific days—Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Amazon Prime Day—to support workers’ strikes, walkouts, and other actions and demonstrate public support for better wages and conditions. The point is not that nothing has changed over the last century, but rather that the past is not so distant.

The activist groups that I highlight in these four chapters used their members’ privileges—including education, media savvy, personal and political connections, purchasing power, class, and race—to support workers during labor disputes, establish labor laws and independent monitoring

of workplaces, and influence consumers to make ethical purchasing decisions. Navigating the disparities between workers and their allies was often challenging and messy, but, at their best, these organizations did not command or lead sweatshop laborers, but rather provided additional points of pressure on industrial and retail employers through elaborate boycotts, publicity, and strike support. As such, they are important models of feminist solidarity—of women organizing in support of themselves, their communities, and one another. They also show that people can work together against much more powerful political forces and, occasionally, win victories that make concrete improvements in the lives of working people. For example, in 2004, the workers in Saipan—whose lawsuit I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction—reached a twenty-million-dollar settlement with almost fifty US retailers and Saipan factories, upending conditions for workers and manufacturers—and setting the stage for the next conflict.

By the early 1900s, where chapter 1 begins, American industrial capitalists had experienced decades of expanding economic and political control. Though routinely confronted by workers, their power and influence were immense. In chapter 1, “The Struggle Has But Begun”: The Labor Feminism of the Progressive Era,” I look at the Progressive Era alliances of workers and activists in the National Consumers’ League and the Women’s Trade Union League, who together challenged the myths of capitalist meritocracy and pushed for change. Both groups offered support to sweatshop workers during massive garment workers’ strikes and in the aftermath of the tragic Triangle Fire. With memberships that included both sweated workers and middle-class and elite reformers, I argue that these organizations were important examples of economic activism and feminist solidarity—models that were adopted and improved upon throughout the twentieth century. Deriving strength both from their relative privilege and their practical understanding of workplace realities, they organized strike-relief funds, picket-line support, and soup lines to feed striking workers. They also agitated for worker-friendly labor policies and workplace protections, using the imagery of the “sweatshop” as a catalyst for a new consensus on improved safety regulations. In response to this movement’s successes, however, capital relocated garment factories en masse and orchestrated a return to the unquestioned laissez-faire policies of the Gilded Age.

During the Great Depression, the Popular Front, a new coalition of left-leaning students, union organizers, civil rights activists, artists, writers,

clergy, workers, and consumers emerged to fight for better working conditions and to challenge white supremacy. In chapter 2, “‘Don’t Overlook Any Channel for Publicity’: The Solidarity of the Popular Front,” I highlight the League of Women Shoppers, a key organization in that coalition that engaged in a range of creative protest in support of striking workers. With a membership of twenty-five thousand and chapters throughout the country—including in the US South—the group’s slogan, “Use your buying power for justice,” broadcast its intent to use members’ shopping dollars to influence the outcome of various work stoppages and protests. The group was flashy—its members included famous Hollywood playwrights and actors, as well as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt—and bold. It organized boycotts, pickets, and fashion shows, and it expanded the use of the term of “sweatshop” to industries beyond garment work. By the late 1930s, though, the group and the broader movement began to unravel under extreme political pressure, as the American Right reframed civil rights and labor agitation as threats to national security.

Chapter 3, “‘Settle the Case, or We’ll Be in Your Face’: The Worldview of the Global Justice Movement,” examines the return to prominence both of anti-sweatshop activism and of the American public’s awareness of sweatshop labor. As a series of scandals exposed the working conditions of the global, “free trade”-era economy of the 1990s, anti-sweatshop groups, including Global Exchange and Sweatshop Watch, worked to turn public awareness into concrete change through lawsuits, pressure campaigns, and other protests. Activists faced many of the same challenges as their counterparts in earlier eras, but they also had to adapt to an industry that was increasingly mobile and global, and that often relied on contracted factories in foreign countries—far away from US consumers.

Chapter 4, “‘Amazon Crime’: The Omnipresence of the New Global Assembly Line,” addresses the current moment, the 2010s and 2020s, in which a massive global supply-chain, climate change, the internet, and now the Covid-19 pandemic have upended the lives of workers and consumers alike and complicated the lines between them. Increasing numbers of workers have joined what some call the “precariat”—a class of laborers with few rights and even less job security due to subcontracting, temporary contracts, and the absence of benefits. They notably include day laborers, seasonal hires, adjuncts, and, more recently, workers in the app-based “gig economy.” I argue that the growing masses of precarious gig workers are essentially an expression of an old identity—the sweatshop worker, who, like an Uber driver, has often been paid per piece and treated as contractor

rather than an employee. In this chapter, I explore the working conditions of companies like Amazon, Apple, and Foxconn, as well as worker and community resistance to these behemoths.

In each chapter of this book, women play significant roles, both as workers and as activists. Though expressed more explicitly at some times than others, this is a book about feminist solidarity—about movements that confronted not just the unchecked power of capital, but the power of patriarchy specifically. In one example in the pages that follow, a judge tells a group of women that instead of picketing, they “should be home knitting.”²¹ In another, nearly a century later, a woman objecting to sexual harassment from coworkers is told by factory supervisors that she needs to learn how to take a joke.

Women’s solidarity was central to the cross-class alliances in these groups, between the most vulnerable workers and members of the self-described “comfortable class.”²² While not the only impulse driving these movements, their implicit and explicit feminism routinely drove them to push beyond the boundaries of traditional labor organizing and gender norms. For example, in addition to organizing around wages and hours, anti-sweatshop activists at times also targeted unfair hiring practices, deportations, and sexual violence. Likewise, while boycotts and other selective purchasing activities fit neatly within mainstream American gender norms for married women at the turn of the last century, activists in these movements, including college students and professionals, also challenged those limitations by confronting police and orchestrating media coverage.

The rise and fall of American anti-sweatshop movements through these periods and these chapters is the devastating history of the many horrors of the sweatshop economy, as well as the inspiring history of those who have dared to confront it. It is a history that connects us, in the present, to people in the distant past and to people all over the world.

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