

AIHA Position Statement on Sweatshops in the Global Economy

Adopted by the AIHA Board of Directors
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The American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) is the largest professional organization of industrial hygienists in the world, representing 12,000 members primarily in the United States and Canada. Industrial hygienists, as occupational health professionals, provide scientific and technical expertise and perform critical on-site recognition, evaluation, and control of workplace health and safety hazards to workers, communities, and the environment.

AIHA believes workers have universal, fundamental rights no matter where in the world or for whom they work. These rights include the right to a safe and healthful workplace for themselves and the communities in which their employers operate.

Certain characteristics of the global economy have been widely recognized as threatening or weakening these rights. These aspects include economic pressures to seek countries and facilities with the lowest wage rates; sourcing and production chains including contractors, subcontractors, temporary or contingent employees, and other tiered workforces; the lack of adequate regulations and meaningful enforcement by government agencies in many countries; and the vulnerability of local workforces who have no alternative but to accept whatever work is offered.

"Sweatshop working conditions" -- multiple violations of labor, occupational safety and health and environmental laws -- exist in both developing and developed economies and appear to be growing. Highly publicized incidents of child labor, extremely low wages, and unhealthy and unsafe conditions are emblematic of conditions found in the United States and globally, often throughout entire industrial sectors, such as agriculture and construction, and garment, sports shoe, and toy production.

Efforts to reduce sweatshops, including numerous codes of conduct and international monitoring schemes, have been inadequate to date due to the following: a) the lack of adequately trained environmental health and safety (EHS) auditors, b) the lack of universal or standardized criteria for evaluating and comparing EHS performance between plants, and c) the lack of involvement of key local players -- workers themselves, unions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) -- who are best able to report and monitor plant conditions because they are closest to them.

AIHA is reaching out in a collaborative approach with other EHS organizations in the United States and internationally to explore both traditional and nontraditional approaches to improving workplace EHS in the world's sweatshops. A special effort will be made to work in conjunction with local community-based organizations and other NGOs having access to and enjoying the confidence of sweatshop workers.

AIHA recognizes that focusing on EHS problems in sweatshops and monitoring compliance with national and international EHS regulations will not substantially change the powerful economic realities that foster sweatshop conditions in first place. AIHA advocates improvement in the social and economic conditions of developing countries, and of vulnerable populations in the developed world, to ensure all workers are guaranteed basic human rights and economic benefits.

The American Industrial Hygiene Association:

- calls on the federal and state governments in the United States to enforce existing laws against sweatshop conditions and allocate the resources necessary to achieve this goal in our own country;
- calls on the U.S. Congress and Executive Branch to support trade and investment treaties that would produce an international 3rd harmonization of occupational and environmental health regulations and practices; and to develop models for procurement/contracting policies by the U.S. government that would incorporate occupational and environmental health performance into contract bidding and awarding procedures;
- will collaborate with other occupational health and safety organizations in the United States and internationally to develop criteria for minimum levels of training for EHS auditors, to develop criteria for evaluating and comparing plant-level EHS performance worldwide, and to provide more assistance to help

small businesses in the United States and elsewhere meet their obligation to provide safe and healthful workplaces;

- will collaborate with members of the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA), other EHS professional associations, and community-based organizations in other countries to identify, prioritize, and find funding for the development of the human, technical, and financial resources needed in developing countries to reduce and eliminate sweatshops there;
- will look for opportunities to collaborate with community-based organizations in the United States and internationally to develop nontraditional approaches for improving EHS workplace conditions. This may include AIHA participation in strengthening the capacity ? through training, information, and technical assistance ? of local students, paraprofessionals, and community members to evaluate, audit, and report on conditions ranging from garment sweatshops in New York and Los Angeles to sports shoe and toy factories in Asia.