



in our own backyard

THE HIDDEN PROBLEM OF
CHILD FARMWORKERS IN AMERICA
<http://www.ourownbackyard.org>

Part III: What Can Be Done?

Consumers Movement

Consumers have united to bring about change in working conditions for child laborers and other workers.

*Source: Child Labor Coalition,
<http://www.stopchildlabor.org/Archives/notredam.html#movement>*



Consumers Movement Founded on Social Responsibility

The consumers movement was founded on the belief that the customer who bought sweatshop goods was as much the employer of sweated labor as the boss of the shop. Consumers leagues became the central force in the social justice movement.

"It is the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed and to insist that these conditions shall be wholesome and consistent with a respectable existence on the part of the workers." Josephine Shaw Lowell, founder New York City Consumers League, 1891.

For ninety-eight years, the National Consumers League has represented consumers who are concerned about the conditions under which products are manufactured. To illustrate the philosophy, an early League motto was the following: To live means to buy, to buy means to have power, to have power means to have duties.

In July 1940, Mary Dublin described the League's work as "an expression of the conviction that consumers have a far-reaching responsibility to use their buying power and their power as citizens to advance the general welfare of the community. Substandard wages and depressed industrial conditions impose a burden not on labor alone but on consumers as well. What is not paid in wages, the community is called upon to pay in relief; in wage subsidies; in contributions to meet the cost of illness, dependency, delinquency, and numerous other social ills which these conditions produce."

Since those early years, the consumers movement has blossomed into many areas of interest -- from food/product standards and quality to consumer rights to consumer protection and more. New consumer organizations have expanded the scope and definition of consumer. But the consumer movement's history and mission (for some like the National Consumers League) reflect the continuing commitment and sense of responsibility for the conditions under which products are produced and for the decisions consumers make in the marketplace.

"Fifty years ago today a brilliant, though basically simple, idea was born. This was that the people who buy goods in stores could have a say as to the conditions under which those goods were produced. By their economic and political pressure they could fight child labor, they could protect women against exploitation, they could make the ideal of the minimum wage a living fact." (editorial excerpt on the NCL from The New York Times, December 9, 1949).

Consumer pressure significantly influenced the U.S. passage of child labor laws, minimum wage, and overtime compensation, as well as shorter work days and work weeks. Such efforts culminated in 1938's Fair Labor Standards Act. The League's nearly one hundred years of experience in fighting sweatshops and child labor underscores some basic truths which are applicable today:

1. Consumers should not expect a problem to be solved just because a law has been passed. When various industries, responding to the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 established codes prescribing maximum hours, minimum wages, collective bargaining, and abolition of child labor, the National Consumers League hoped its major work was accomplished. When the codes went into effect, the League kept in close touch with workers to find out how they were affected. It was soon apparent that in industries where unions were strong, workers benefited through higher wages and shorter hours. But in unorganized industries, while there was improvement in hours

and wages, unscrupulous employers used every possible device to rob workers of what was due them legally. (On May 27, 1935, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Act unconstitutional.)

2. Consumers want an uncomplicated, easy means to identify products made under decent conditions. As consumer demand increased for such products during the early 1900s, the League developed and oversaw the use of the White Label. The label was attached to women's and children's stitched cotton underwear if the factory guaranteed that it obeyed all factory laws, made all goods on the premises, required no overtime work, and employed no children under age 16. Representatives of the League inspected factories to assure compliance. Originating in New York City, use of the label spread to 13 states. In 1918, the League discontinued the label as union leaders began developing labels that guaranteed labor standards enforcement. Consumers see labels as an easy point-of-purchase tool to use in the marketplace.