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Book Review: Sweatshop Warriors

Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take On The Global Factory by Miriam Ching Yoon Louie. Published by South End Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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Retrieved on 15th November 2021 from www.wsm.ie
Published in *Red & Black Revolution* No. 14.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The book seamlessly alternates between the direct testimony of the 'Sweatshop Warriors' themselves and analysis of the growth and spread of globalised capitalism. This book was published in 2001 but 7 years later its strength still lies in its simplicity.

It gives voice to "immigrant women workers who are barred from rooms where deals get cut...who get punished for telling the truth; who are asked to speak only as victims..." And by giving a platform to these too often unheard voices, the book demonstrates that self-organisation is the key to successfully fighting back against the exploitation and abuse faced by those at the bottom of the economic ladder.

"Luckily for us...", writes the author – who herself has spent over thirty years working in various solidarity organisations thus gaining a unique insight and access to the people she

writes about – “...these workers are chiselling through thick walls of censorship to make themselves heard.

They are organizing themselves in workers’ centres, creating their own groups when the labour or community organizations that already exist fail to meet their needs. Contrary to conventional wisdom that leans heavily on white and/or male academics, these women are the real experts about the inner workings of the global economy, labour markets, and immigrant communities – speaking to us from the bottom of the sweatshop industry pyramid.”

Even for those already familiar with the nature of capitalism, and aware of the even deeper exploitations attached to globalization and the growth of sub-contracting, this book’s stark and vivid description of the “pyramid of labour exploitation and profit generation” is useful.

The manner in which huge US retailers such as Wal-Mart, K-Mart, etc. and designers such as DKNY are able to wash their hands of any responsibility for labour conditions and wages in the factories in which the goods they sell are made, the way in which they can pit sub-contractor against sub-contractor thus driving wages down even further, the way in which the sub-contractors themselves can pit more established workers against newcomers and ‘documented’ workers against ‘undocumented’ – all of it contributes to painting a picture of exploitation as stark as it is possible to imagine.

Two statistics quoted in the book’s introduction sum it up: “Garment workers in Los Angeles...each produce about \$100,000 worth of goods in a year, but are paid less than 2 percent of the total value. For a dress that retails for \$100, \$1.72 goes to the sewer, \$15 to the contractor, and \$50 goes to the manufacturer.” “In 1960, CEOs made 41 times their average employee’s wage; in 1990, 85 times; but in 1999, the gap sky-rocketed to 475 times.”

With its descriptions of the horrific labour conditions endured by its subjects, this book could easily have become de-

pressing and downbeat. But far from it. The women interviewed and featured in the book are living testament to the human spirit and their stories of fighting back against the exploitation they are forced to live under are a source of encouragement to all who would fight for a fair and just world.

Chinese immigrant women garment and restaurant workers in New York, Mexican immigrant seamstresses in El Paso, San Antonio and Los Angeles, Korean immigrant women restaurant workers in Los Angeles' Korea-town all speak to us directly of the experiences that shaped their need to get active and fight back. The experiences of campaigns organised by these women such as the Garment Workers Justice Campaign of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates,

La Mujer Obrera and the Korean immigrant Workers Advocates' Workers Organising Project have plenty of lessons for all involved in the fight against global capitalism.

The strongest message that this book gives is that that battle against global capitalism is almost always a series of local battles. "When these immigrant women workers were confronted with the big picture of sweatshop exploitation, to paraphrase labour agitator Mother Jones, they didn't just get mad – they got organised." In the Ireland of 2008, sweatshop conditions such as those described in this book don't exist.

But with the increase in immigration to Ireland in the last number of years, there is no doubt that wage rates have been driven down and exploitation and abuse of workers' rights has increased exponentially. Small skirmishes against that exploitation have taken place – the most high profile being that of the GAMA workers in 2005 (see www.anarkismo.net for details).

Many more of these battles face us, and the stories of the immigrant workers detailed in this book give heart and guidance as to how these battles might be won. Because the subjects of this book are women, they found themselves contending not

alone with the exploitation of their bosses but also with the demands of the patriarchal society in which they live.

Some of the women interviewed migrated to the USA before their families and worked to make the money to bring their families after them. In other cases, they followed their families. All of them have unique stories to tell but all of them have faced common hurdles. As well as providing an income for their families they have had to deal with the challenges of childcare, cooking, cleaning etc.

Yet they have overcome all of these challenges to establish their own organizations most of which are run by women and all of which have a majority of women members. The challenges they have faced and the issues they have had to deal with have not alone been issues of exploitation in the workplace but have often involved challenging some of the sexual stereotypes which they have come across in their communities. There is no blueprint for how exploited workers might organize themselves to fight back. To some extent every battle is unique.

But there are also plenty of lessons to be learnt from those battles which are fought, especially those which are successful. All workers in Ireland took heart from the tremendous fighting spirit showed by the GAMA workers. The lessons learned in that battle will be used by other groups of workers in future struggles.

Belatedly, trade unions here are at last starting to wake up to the need to get serious about the organisation of immigrant workers. But what this book shows is that it is the self-organised community and labour groups which will take the battle to the bosses – and that often the official trade union leadership can get in the way just as much as be of assistance. This book is a refreshing and informative read, and should serve as an inspiration to all of us to trust the human spirit and to believe in the dignity of the fight-back. It is also a call to arms – a challenge to take up that fight wherever each of

us might be. The author sums it up, “Listening to the women speak cannot be an act of consumerism. Seeing them fight for their rights cannot be an act of voyeurism. Listening to the women means returning to the source, to the heart of what today’s struggles for justice and dignity are all about.

Just as the women have stepped forward, pushed themselves harder, and struggled to take on new challenges with oh-so-scarce resources, so each of us is called upon to do the same, wherever we may work and live, with whomever we consider our sisters and brothers, co-workers and community. We must ask ourselves individually and collectively what we are doing to challenge the pyramids of oppression we face. Turning down the volume of the elite’s chatter, we must train our ears to listen harder to hear the vibrant voices and lyrical leadership of grassroots folk on the bottom, the foundation rock of mass movements...”