In the introduction to his impressive book on poverty and abuse in the new sweatshops, *Slaves to Fashion*, Bob Ross recalls in moving terms the heroic struggles of early 20th century U.S. textile workers – many of them immigrants – to win decent wages and working conditions. Later on he writes just as movingly about the 1909/10 strikes of female and then male cloakmakers in New York, which launched the American industrial union movement; and he tells the tale of the notorious 1911 Triangle fire. And in a “Personal Epilogue” at the end of the book, Ross paints a grim picture of a contemporary female sweatshop laborer in China, who – like the American women a century earlier, and like so many sweatshop workers in the United States today – starves for bread and roses.

Ross – himself the son and grandson of New York garment industry workers, and thus personally linked to his subject in a manner rare for a social scientist – is at his most passionate and eloquent when he is describing the experiences of workers struggling for decency in a brutal working environment. He underlines very effectively the tragic course of apparel workers in the United States who have come full circle from the sweatshop labor of the early 20th century through the decent wage-and-working environment of the mid-century to the sweatshop labor of the contemporary era. He makes it clear that it took a strong union movement, and resultant beneficent government regulation, for workers to reap both bread and roses.

The bulk of Ross’s book is a comprehensive, highly informative, and well-documented account of everything you might want to know about the apparel industry and its workers in the United States. In part 1 Ross describes “The Fall and Rise of Sweatshops in the United States,” from the struggles of the garment workers against sweatshop conditions in the early 20th century to the return of clothing sweatshops under new conditions in the latter decades of the century. Part 2 is devoted to “Explaining the Rise of the New Sweatshops” in the United States; in the final part 3 Ross examines “Movements and Policies” designed to combat sweatshop conditions in the contemporary era.

Before turning to his historical account of the evolution of U.S. sweatshops, Ross wrestles in chapter 1 with the definition of sweatshop labor; he tries to estimate the total number of sweatshop workers in the contemporary United States. He ends up defining a sweatshop, not unambiguously, as “a place where workers are paid below the local minimum wage or where, at that wage, they are unable to meet their basic needs” (41). He...
then goes on to estimate – in a way that is regrettably not very clearly explained – the number of sweatshop workers in the United States in the year 2000 at roughly 250,000 (45).

In the rest of part 1 Ross traces cogently the 20th century history of the U.S. apparel industry, from the decline of the old sweatshops to the rise of the new ones. There are of course industries other than apparel (and knitting mills, which Ross includes as part of the apparel complex) in which sweatshop conditions can be found, such as footwear, sports equipment, toys, and a variety of other light consumer goods. While it is perfectly appropriate to focus on a key industry like apparel, which probably accounts for more sweatshop labor than any other industry in the United States, readers of the book might have welcomed a discussion of the broader reach of sweatshop conditions.

Seeking in part 2 to explain the rise of the new sweatshops, Ross analyzes a range of possible causes including increased immigration, the “race to the bottom” in global capitalism, the power of the huge retail chains, the weakening of the U.S. union movement, and the hamstringing of government regulation. He argues that “high legal immigration is neither necessary nor sufficient for sweatshop appearance” (243), relying mainly on the fact that the massive entry of Puerto Ricans into the New York apparel industry in the 1950s and 1960s did not significantly undermine the high standards that workers had achieved in earlier decades. He goes on to blame the rise of the new sweatshops primarily on low-wage international competition, as well as the decline of union power and government regulation, the undocumented status of so many immigrant workers, and the concentration of economic power in giant retail marketing chains (100, 244).

Ross’s analysis in part 2 of the book is certainly plausible, but not without some weaknesses. For example, the relatively strong performance of the U.S. economy and the related “accord” between U.S. capital and labor during the period of greatest Puerto Rican immigration may have played a bigger role than he allows in explaining the fact that this inflow of low-skilled labor did not result in an upsurge of sweatshop labor comparable with what was to come a few decades later. Ross’s emphasis on the market power of big retail chains as an important causal factor in explaining sweatshop conditions may be excessive. Even if apparel were marketed by dozens of highly competitive retailers, the wages and working conditions of apparel-producing workers would most likely remain depressed in the context of a huge world surplus of unskilled labor desperate for any kind of income-earning opportunity. The powerful retail chains, because of their high visibility and high profit margins, are actually more likely than small retailers to be vulnerable to workers’ rights campaigns designed to shame them into improving conditions for the workers who produce the goods they market.

Ross is certainly right, however, to stress that low-wage international competition is the number-one culprit in the reappearance of sweatshop labor in the United States in recent decades. He is right, too, that high levels of legal immigration alone are not sufficient to generate sweatshop conditions in affluent countries, and that such conditions might well exist even without legal immigration. But some sort of immigration, on a substantial scale, is arguably necessary in order for sweatshops to become more than an isolated phenomenon in an industrialized country with a long history of labor activism. Putting an end to the inflow of poor immigrants into affluent countries – quite apart from its questionable morality – is inconceivable in the present era. The same process of globalization that has forced enterprises in high-wage countries into intensified competition with enterprises in low-wage countries (often within the same corporation) has also disrupted traditional work arrangements around the world, thereby generating hundreds of millions
of new and mostly very poor entrants into the labor market. The resultant excess supply of labor in the poor countries spurs many of these people to migrate—legally or illegally—into more affluent countries in search of better job opportunities.

In the final part 3 of his book, Ross provides a useful compendium of contemporary movements and policies seeking to combat sweatshops by promoting labor rights both nationally and internationally. He is understandably upset that apparel industry workers in the United States of the early 21st century are facing the same kinds of problems that plagued their predecessors in the early 20th century. He clearly hopes that the kind of valiant and ultimately successful struggles that improved conditions so markedly for 20th century apparel workers can and will be repeated in the 21st century. His discussion of alternative anti-sweatshop actions, and the elements necessary for success of the anti-sweatshop movement, is both informative and instructive. He concludes part 3 by formulating a “Three Pillars of Decency Agenda” to combat sweatshop labor: rebuild union strength, implement government policies in support of labor rights, and support consumer campaigns against unfair labor practices.

Reviewing Ross’s book has led me to reflect on the larger global context in which, over the last several decades, sweatshops have returned to the United States. There can be no question that since the end of World War II, and especially over the last 25 years, both the degree of international competition (including intra-corporate competition across national boundaries) and the movement of people across societal and national boundaries have greatly increased. The contemporary phase of globalization differs from earlier ones in a number of key respects. Enterprises and workers in the richer countries now find themselves in competition with enterprises and workers not only in other rich countries but also in poorer countries. Many countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, which used to export primarily raw materials to the rich countries, are now increasingly capable of producing and exporting industrial goods as well as services that used to be produced mainly in the rich countries. China and India in particular, with their huge populations, have supplied massive numbers of new workers to the global capitalist economic system. After the collapse of their communist regimes, most of the nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have opened up their economies to the rest of the world, bringing large numbers of new workers and substantial new productive potential into the global system.

In past phases of globalization, migration involved primarily people from the rich countries of the capitalist center going to the poorer regions of the periphery (with the obvious exception of the slave trade). Nowadays what is far more important is voluntary migration in the opposite direction, as impoverished people from the periphery seek better economic opportunities in the nations of the center. In increasing the effective supply of low-skilled and semi-skilled labor to the center, and in enabling firms more easily to shift their operations from one country to another, contemporary globalization has clearly strengthened the hand of capital in the center vis-à-vis all but highly-skilled labor. This has undermined the strength of unions and contributed to the decline of effective government enforcement of labor standards, thereby slowing, if not reversing, the gains in wages and working conditions arduously achieved over many decades in the affluent countries.

As Ross rightly emphasizes, the illegal status of a large fraction of immigrant workers in the United States facilitates their relegation to sweatshop labor conditions. The United States and most of the other large countries at the center of the world economy have not been able to curtail significantly the tide of low-skilled immigrants, nor have they been
willing to confer legal status on the bulk of them. When so many workers lack legal status, they are easily exploitable at the workplace and they have no voice in politics. Little wonder, then, that sweatshop labor conditions are also migrating from the periphery to the center.

Ross’s agenda for combating sweatshop labor in the contemporary United States displays an invigorating optimism of the will, but it is hard to summon a comparable optimism of the intellect. It seems to me that there is little ground for believing that even a much more active and powerful anti-sweatshop movement could do much to relieve the misery of today’s sweatshop workers in the U.S. apparel industry. The most optimistic possible scenario is that such a movement would succeed in unionizing all low-wage workers in the United States – whether native-born or immigrant – and, through a combination of union power and (related) government regulation, it would succeed in assuring decent wages and working conditions. As such conditions were being achieved, however, apparel workers in the United States would be pricing themselves out of the market. Surely the apparel marketers would turn exclusively to imports from lower-cost production sites elsewhere in the world, where, even if working conditions were improved through the efforts of dedicated activists and a more unified international labor movement, wages would remain well below the level needed to assure a minimally decent standard of living in the United States.

This is not a reason to give up the struggle for better working conditions for low-wage workers in the United States and around the world. The anti-sweatshop movement has achieved some real gains for low-wage workers, especially abroad, and it has the potential for even greater achievements in the future. There can be no question that the efforts of labor activists are admirable and worthy of whole-hearted support. But they cannot do for the U.S. apparel industry in the 21st century what labor activism achieved in the 20th century. In all industries employing sweatshop labor and facing significant international competition, the eradication of sweatshop conditions in affluent countries like the United States will result in the outsourcing of jobs to countries where much lower wages, if not sweatshop conditions, are still the rule.

It should be noted, however, that the situation is quite different in the case of low-wage jobs that cannot be outsourced, for example, agricultural and domestic service jobs. In such fields, where the labor must be performed within the United States, there is much greater potential for a strong domestic labor movement to improve the wages and working conditions of low-wage workers. The risk here is that a higher cost of labor will result in more substitution of capital for labor, but the scope for such substitution is surely much more limited than in the case of industrial low-wage jobs.

To conclude: Robert Ross has written an engaging, informative, and constructive book on the U.S. apparel industry, analyzing the decline and subsequent rise of sweatshop labor therein, situating the return of sweatshop labor in the worldwide context of the latest phase of globalization, and exploring strategies for combating sweatshops. It is not aimed at researchers in the field, but it is highly accessible to undergraduate students and quite suitable for classroom use. The book’s strengths greatly outweigh its weaknesses; it represents an important contribution to the debate about contemporary globalization and what to do about it.

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