



Exhibition St MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Telephone 03 9639 2955

Homeworkers Email tommy@nosweatshoplabel.com

Website: www.nosweatshoplabel.com

Homeworkers Code of Practice Committee Inc 359

Facsimile 03 9639 2944

Code of Practice Committee

Submission from the: Homeworkers Code of Practice Committee
to the: 'Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian Schools'

Prepared by: Tommy Clarke, Project Officer, Homeworkers
Code of Practice

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- Executive Summary of the submission

The State Government should require clothing manufacturers supplying Victorian schools to be 'Accredited' to the Homeworkers Code of Practice, because regardless of whether or not mandatory uniform or dress codes are adopted, procurement arrangements need to ensure that all school uniforms worn by students are manufactured in an ethical manner and are free of exploitation.

The State Government should adopt and implement its own Code of Practice in relation to Textile Clothing and Footwear suppliers modelled on the Queensland State Government's 'Code of Practice on employment and outwork obligations'.

- Introduction

Many people are shocked when they learn textile workers in Australia are often paid as little as three dollars an hour. Extreme and widespread cases of exploitation are not limited to far away sweat shops overseas, but sadly are a mainstay of the Australian clothing and fashion industry. Many clothes that most Victorians wear to work, to special events, for sport or leisure activities, as well as the clothes our children wear to school, were produced for below-Award wages in sub-standard conditions.

Any discussion about school uniforms in Victoria should take into account the need to

ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure garments worn by Victorian school students are free of exploitation. Instead of unwittingly reinforcing the unfair practices of the textile clothing and footwear (TCF) industry, school communities have the ability to set a new benchmark for ethical procurement.

This submission considers: the views of school communities and the wider community about school uniforms; practical uniform procurement arrangements; matters which need to be considered to ensure dress codes and uniform policies are consistent with appropriate policies; and national and international trends.

- About the No Sweat Shop label

The Homeworkers Code of Practice (HWCP) and its 'No Sweat Shop' label is a joint Industry-Union initiative aimed at reducing the high levels of exploitation in the fashion and clothing industry.

The principle behind the HWCP is, if manufacturers can make their production chains transparent, then exploitation can be easily identified and addressed. Participating manufacturers ensure that their suppliers operate within the agreed standards by adhering to a system to monitor, record and report what is being made, where it is being made, who is making it, and what rates and conditions the workers receive. Manufacturers who successfully have their supply chain 'Accredited' are then eligible to use the 'No Sweat Shop' label.

When consumers see the 'No Sweat Shop' label on garment, they can be confident that the garment was made in Australia and all of the people involved in its production received, as a minimum, the Award rates and conditions.

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- The HWCP's Recommendations to the inquiry

Recognising the growing national and international demand for ethical practices across all sectors, the HWCP is of the strong opinion that Victoria's school communities deserve to be confident that all school uniforms worn by Victorian students have been made in an ethical manner and free from exploitation.

Therefore, a stringent procurement policy needs to be adopted to ensure all suppliers of uniforms to all Victorian schools, with or without mandatory uniform/dress codes, are Accredited to the HWCP.

Such a procurement arrangement would support local manufacturing, assist efforts to eliminate the disturbing levels of exploitation in the clothing industry, and allow parents to be secure in the knowledge that their children are not dressed in unethical uniforms.

The HWCP also suggests the Victorian Government adopts and implements its own Code of Practice in relation to Textile Clothing and Footwear suppliers, modelled on the Queensland State Government's 'Code of Practice on employment and outwork obligations' which for your reference is attached to this submission.

- Background information about Homeworkers and the TCF Industry

In Australia and in other countries, some people in the fashion and textile industry work in modern factories for legal pay. More often however, they work in a cramped sweatshop or in a room or garage at home for substandard wages. People who work at home, away from the employer's premises, are known as outworkers or homeworkers.

Because home-based labour is a 'hidden' or 'invisible' workforce, it is impossible to say exactly how many outworkers there are in Australia, but it is estimated that around 75 percent of companies in the clothing sector having production performed in private homes. Various research projects and Federal Senate inquiries agree that outwork is now so prevalent in the fashion clothing sector that it is not just a characteristic of the industry -the entire industry is actually structured around it.

Being isolated and with very little bargaining power, homeworkers are in an extremely vulnerable position. The vast majority of homeworkers are women from non-English speaking backgrounds.

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The low piece rates that homeworkers are usually paid translate to very low hourly wage rates, which fall well below legal industry standards. Homeworkers in Australia typically work 12 hour days, six or seven days a week, for about one third of the award rate of pay. It is not uncommon to find outworkers receiving \$3 an hour and sometimes less.

In addition to experiencing poor working conditions and unreasonable or improper terms from employers, homeworkers very rarely receive industrial entitlements such as paid annual leave, superannuation, or sick leave.

Due to the high number of parties usually involved in the production of garments, manufacturers find it easy to pass responsibility on to another person or company in the production chain. The growing influence of retailers further up the supply chain has the capacity to increase pressure on price and response time. The price of garments is usually set at the top of the chain and then successively eroded, often by non-production parties, as the work moves further down the chain.

Due to poor working conditions and inferior machinery, homeworkers are three times as likely to have work related injuries, both acute and chronic, than their counterparts who work in factories. However, numerous studies show that homeworkers simply do not make workers' compensation claims. There is a widespread reluctance from homeworkers to speak up about their maltreatment, due to fear of jeopardising their work supply. Such concerns are exasperated by the extremely low incomes that most homeworkers live on.

Homeworkers face irregular work and an insecure income. Homeworkers are often given unrealistic deadlines to meet and children and other family members have to help finish the work. Receiving no payment or less than what was originally agreed on, is also a common problem.

More information about the HWCP and its 'No Sweat Shop' label can be found online at:
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