Ethel C. Brooks.
Unraveling the Garment Industry; Transnational Organizing and Women's Work.

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The most globalized industry in the world, the garment industry exemplifies a new international division of labour in which fragments of industries in the North are "offshored" to new centres of industrialization in the Global South. The global garment industry is the fragile developmental heart of many of the world's poorest countries. Most of the world's 30 million garment workers toil in Dickensian misery. The garment industry is also the primary focus of transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns to reverse the "race to the bottom" in global labour standards. In the semiotic world of Nike swooshes and logo'd consumer identities, the anti-sweatshop movement is pivotal to a political realignment between labour politics and a new politics of ethical consumption.

To understand this new politics, Brooks has researched garment workers in Bangladesh, New York City, and El Salvador for over a decade. Her analysis centres on three transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns in the mid 1990s: one against child labour in the garment industry in Bangladesh; another against violations of labour standards in garment plants in El Salvador; and a third campaign linking sweatshops in El Salvador to sweatshops in New York City. Contrary to those who see such campaigns as new forms of international labour solidarity, Brooks argues that these campaigns reflected and reinforced previous imperial and colonial relations. Campaigns that are initiated in the North, in large part by consumers, make shopfloor issues secondary, she argues, and focus on sweatshops as if they were aberrations instead of normal business in the apparel industry. The unintended consequence is that the tactics of transnational campaigns tend to reproduce class, race and immigration status differences. Because the campaigns tend to focus inordinately on appeals to corporate leaders to support their demands, they depend on the "patronage and sense of noblesse oblige of retailers and stockholders" to become "good global citizens." As a result, the struggles of the garment workers, as workers, women, consumers and activists — as citizens — are moved to the periphery of the campaigns.

In the case of the transnational campaign against child labour in Bangladesh, a boycott initiated in a context of trade protectionism by members of the US Congress and US-based labour NGOs led to the firing of 10,000 children in two weeks. Mass protests by the displaced children, Bangladeshi unions and local activists led to a compromise. That agreement created schools and stipends for fired garment workers, a phasing out of child labour in the industry, and a monitoring system to ensure compliance in relation to child labour. Bangladesh became a "paradigm for success in labour rights." Yet the participants in negotiating this paradigm were US and European consumers, factory owners in Bangladesh, and representatives from international organizations. The women and children who worked in the factories and those who protested the firings were voiceless, Brooks argues. "The process of salvation in solidarity's name is then a reenactment of earlier (colonial) salvations — of an entire history of 'taking up the white man's burden.'" (24) With the new agreement in place, Bangladesh returned to "the docile, disciplined, and productive site expected by imperialist players in the Bangladeshi solution"(25).

Similarly, the campaign to improve labour standards at garment factory in El Salvador succeeded in setting up a corporate code of conduct and monitoring organization for suppliers of Gap clothing, but the garment workers themselves were left out of the bargaining. Their union dwindled while a

company union gained strength. Brooks also argues that the campaign to protest the abuse of immigrant workers and sweatshops in New York City, and at another factory in El Salvador similarly marginalized the workers themselves. In New York City the campaign led to the arrest and deportation of undocumented workers. In El Salvador, the women who organized the union and took over the free trade zone where their factory was located had no role in the negotiations. Their efforts were "underplayed in favor of highlighting their victimization in the face of corporate greed" (31). Even though it had no real power, the group which was set up to monitor labour standards in the factory took the place of the union (42).

By privileging consumption demands, such campaigns contribute to a crisis of politics in which "citizenship and participation have become linked increasingly with buying power and the ability to boycott and protest labour rights through attacks on brand names, company logos and corporate reputations" (166) In this privatized politics, consumers tend "unthinkingly to maintain a self contained world of protest, similar to gated communities and malls" (167). Pyrrhic victories in the South pacify conscience consumers in the North who believe corporate codes of conduct have eliminated sweatshops. Brooks maintains the anti-sweatshop movement has become integral to processes of globalization it seemingly opposes: "what we see is not so new; rather, it is a replication of globalization from above but framed as a new globalization from below" (117).

Brooks' main thesis is powerful. It is true that there is no evidence that the campaigns have had any significant or lasting effect on most labour standards in the South, particularly the key rights to form independent unions and bargain collectively. Furthermore, her argument that it is local struggles by workers themselves that matter most, and that these struggles are a necessary precondition for transnational labour campaigns, is compelling. In contrast to the optimism that reigned until a few years ago, many anti-sweatshop activists in the US, Canada and elsewhere would now agree with much of her argument. Today the anti-sweatshop movement is facing a crisis of legitimacy, mainly because corporate codes of conduct have failed, by and large, to improve key labour standards in the South. The extreme mobility and competitiveness of capital, combined with unprecedented unemployment and underemployment throughout the South, and public relations campaigns by big retailers, has the anti-sweatshop movement reeling, in both North and South. It is thus harder than ever to portray sweatshops as exceptions: in the global garment industry they are the rule.

Sometimes Brooks overstates her arguments. In part, this may stem from a perception that the campaigns are more powerful and independent of constraints than they are. For example, her argument that transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns largely let states off the hook by focussing on private and voluntary corporate regulation of labour standards is important. At the same time, however, the onus for this is largely on states and inter-state organizations, particularly the World Trade Organization, that consistently refuse to regulate labour rights in the context of neoliberal globalization. Indeed, it is this refusal which gave rise to corporate codes of conduct and the anti-sweatshop movement. In focussing on codes of conduct, anti-sweatshop activists have not been using weapons of choice but rather those that are available.

Brooks is right that consumer-based politics impoverishes the meaning of citizenship and politics. Yet, her Southern perspective underemphasizes important dynamics of mobilization in the North. Consumer campaigns, especially focussed on logo'd clothing, have been indispensable gateways to consciousness-raising in liberal, consumerist societies. Such consumer choices are not morally comparable to workers' struggles against the firings and police clubs in the South, but mobilization under contemporary globalization requires tactics that resonate with supportive dimensions of prevailing political cultures. This is reflected in the extraordinary diversity of the global justice

"movement of movements." And it is consistent with Brooks' own prescription: "In order to explore the (re)production of globalization as a hegemonic movement, it is necessary to turn it on its head and look at globalized relations and capital as particular, unstable, and shifting in all its sites — from factory floors to corporate boardrooms, retail outlets and advertising outlets" (164) .

Don Wells
McMaster University
wellsd@mcmaster.ca

Don Wells teaches in the Labour Studies Programme and Political Science Department at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. He is the author of several articles on the regulation of international labour standards, including an article, co-authored with Graham Knight, on the importance of local worker struggles in transnational campaigns. See "Bringing the local back in: Trajectory of contention of the union struggle at Kukdong/Mexmode" *Social Movement Studies* 6:2, 83-103 (2007).

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