

## What are the working conditions of the person who made the clothes you wear or the items you use to have a comfortable life?

By Pauline Cahalan

Henri Nouwen wrote “Once we start reading the events of our time as calls to conversion, our perception of history changes radically” (p. 59). When our Rule tells us to “To live the Gospel in life-giving union with all” that gives us a lot to think about as we try to keep up with events in the U.S, and abroad. I’ve been trying to do this more so I can make educated choices about candidates when I go to the voting booth this year and next. One of our jobs as citizens of a democracy would seem to be paying attention to decisions being made that affect all aspects of our lives within the U.S. as well as those that impact people all over the world. Because we live in a democracy we have more news coverage than we can possibly keep up with. One can tend to be very overwhelmed between the pace with which things happen these days and the amount of information to sift through to figure it out. And, according to The Rule, we are to digest things from the perspective of whether they seem to be “life-giving for all.”

Over the last 30 years or so, a whole dehumanization of the workers that make companies successful and profitable has taken place. When I hear talk about businesses, they speak of how decisions will affect stockholders. How actions will affect workers is rarely discussed. Many corporations see their human workers as liabilities, costing too much to keep, and continually look at how to ‘downsize’ their workforce. I’m not sure who they think is going to buy their products when a large number of people are out of work. “Between 1990 & 2000 average CEO pay rose 571% while workers’ average pay rose 37%” (Huffington, p.14).

How should we think about such societal problems as sweatshops? If a sweatshirt you buy was made in Asia the worker gets 1

cent of the \$10-15.00 you pay. In Latin America the worker gets 4 cents. “But,” you may think, “the cost of living is less in many of those countries so 1 cent or 4 cents goes further.” Find out about life in sweatshops and the lives of the workers. Some websites to start with are [www.nlcnet.org](http://www.nlcnet.org), [www.globalexchange.org](http://www.globalexchange.org), [www.behindthelabel.org](http://www.behindthelabel.org) We are only fooling ourselves when we try to rationalize poverty wages or trying to live on the current minimum wage in the U.S. Ask yourself if you or someone significant to you would want to work in those condition for that money and then try to feed your family and create a decent life for them that would give them a chance to break the cycle of poverty. Very stressful and energy draining!

Compounding problems for all low to even middle income families in the U.S. is a nationwide shortage of affordable housing. Many people are just one paycheck away from living on the street and any unusual event, such as the breadwinner being ill for even a few days, evolves into an eviction notice.

What to do to take some action? Write letters, emails, or phone city, state and federal politicians. Ask candidates what they believe about these issues and how they will work to change injustices. Get into the websites, (those of you without a computer can use one at the library) for your city, state, and federal legislatures to learn about what bills are being discussed. Jim Hightower’s latest book also has lots of ideas for getting involved. Getting active politically can be a little intimidating at first but please make the time to do something. The folks that are often most affected are so busy meeting their basic needs they need us to be their advocates so we can work toward a society that is “life giving” for all.

Huffington, A. (2003). *Pigs at the Trough*. NY: Crown.

Nouwen, H. (2001). *Jesus A Gospel*  
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.