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No, Cato Institute, Sweatshops Are Not Feminist

Lowering wages and the glass ceiling

Jason Rhode

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Chelsea Follett wrote the most incredible piece for *The Hill* the other day. I can't believe it's real, and I've read it about a dozen times. Follett is the managing editor for *Human Progress*, which is the salesman face of the libertarian, globalism-peddling Cato Institute. Cato is a project of the Koch Brothers. Just when I think the far right has lost their power to surprise me, they arrive with an offering like this: "The feminist side of sweatshops." It's 754 words, but every one is just a gem.

"Sweatshops are Feminist." May God himself strike me down if that's not the premise of the entire article. It is an awe-inspiring artillery blast of sophistry, top to bottom. Comfortable, well-educated urban professionals have been writing about how groovy underpaid labor is for some time now. Matt Yglesias famously yawned out a similar feature four years ago. But Follett's equation of "sweatshops equal feminism" is brilliantly malevolent.

In defending far-right economic doctrine, Follett adopts a shallow feminism to sugar the barb. This makes sense. Rapacious libertarian capitalism will never be popular among the working class; it's like asking trees to love wood-chippers. But where Cato could win converts is among the upper-middle-class and centrist, who could be converted over to exploitative Social Darwinist economics—if it was fig-leafed by woke liberal rhetoric. Come, let us reason together.

THE ARGUMENT

Let us take Follett's argument piece by piece:

> Compared to the post-industrial prosperity Americans enjoy today, "sweatshops" seem inhuman.

As of 2015, forty-three million Americans lived in poverty.

> But there is another side to the story. Strange as it sounds, there are places "where sweatshops are a dream" offering life-transforming wages. Particularly for women. Factory work has historically offered women an escape hatch from traditional gender roles. During the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States, young women

> fled the impoverished countryside to work at factories in cities where they could earn and spend their own money.

The 19th-century textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, were the first weed of industrial exploitation to grow in the New World. Follett's inspired tactic is to use this melanoma of American history to justify underpaying women in Asia.

> Most ceased work after marriage, but for a time they enjoyed a level of independence that disturbed Victorian sensibilities.

At the appearance of that noun, "sweatshop," images crowd into the head, of clustered bodies, overseers, fingerless children, fires in locked rooms … how is the skillful writer to disarm those troubling pictures? Watch how Follett pivots, using socially liberal language: she honeys the thorns with the clause "Young women fled the impoverished countryside" and the phrase "independence that disturbed Victorian sensibilities." In the next paragraph, Follett is identifying sweatshop labor with 19th century grrl power: "Many complained that factory conditions were too dangerous for women. Others feared women living apart from the protection of a father or husband would ruin their reputation … "

In defense of the sweatshops, Follett goes on to quote one of the Lowell women, "a textile mill operative" named Harriet. Harriet wrote this in 1840. Here is the part Follett quotes:

> We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome … we are [here] to get money, as much of it and as fast as we can … It is these wages which, in spite of toil, restraint, discomfort, and prejudice, have drawn so many … girls to … factories … one of the most lucrative female employments should [not] be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls have too much independence for that…

That's Follett's cue to announce that the factory girl story is "repeating itself in new settings across the world—both the story of young women gaining economic independence through risk and toil, and the story of widespread panic over their possible exploitation." She runs down a traditional narrative without much data: country bad, city good, female workforce, rising tide, social mobility. The fact that women are now toiling in towns, not in the country, is reason for Follett to rise up and cheer.

"Well-intentioned calls for export restrictions and boycotts can harm the very women they seek to help," Follett writes, "many of whom fear the loss of factory work and a return to rural penury and stricter gender roles. Already, automation threatens the jobs of nine million, mostly young and female, garment factory workers. Boycotts worsen this situation." Follett then concludes with "We should not reject a potential force for women's empowerment in developing countries in an attempt to protect them. Women everywhere have too much independence for that."

Follett's piece rests on two pillars, which I'll call "Foreigners" and "American History."

1) Because foreigners have so little, the exploitation of the factory is superior to the exploitation of the farm. Compared to where they're coming from, this is feminism.

2) American sweatshops, e.g. the Lowell mills, were good for young women in the 19th century.

Let's take the second point first.

THE MILLS

The mill women of Lowell are a compelling case, but against Follett's argument. America has one of the bloodiest labor histories in the world. Wikipedia has a long list.

The struggle started in manufactories like Lowell, where young farm women were treated like replaceable machine cogs. During the Industrial Revolution, investors sought to turn country folk and craftspeople into obedient clock-punchers. Follett's quote is from the *Lowell Offering*, which was a literary journal of the era. Lowell workers eventually stopped writing for it: they thought it was too tame.

Harriet, or Harriet Farley, was an impoverished reverend's daughter. She and her colleagues toiled eighty hours a week, slept in company housing. Six days out of every seven, they were up at 4:40 AM. Five AM was the beginning of the work day. There was a break for breakfast at 7 AM, a half-hour lunch break, back at home at 7 PM, after closing time. Was this feminism?

When Farley wrote for the *Offering* in 1840, the mills of Lowell—"the City of Spindles"—comprised about eight thousand workers, three-quarters women. These factories were breeding grounds for the labor movement. The mill workers protested, went on strike, formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, the first group of American working women to band together for collective bargaining. Their newspaper, *Voice of Industry*, supplanted the *Offering*. It's a shame, but not a surprise, that Cato's writers do not quote from other sources. One worker wrote into the *Voice of Industry*, blasting the owners' propaganda. In a letter published on June 12, 1846, "Juliana" explained that

> Mr. Editor:
> Those who write so effusively about the "Beauties of Factory Life," tell us that we are indeed happy creatures, and how truly grateful and humbly submissive we should be. ... Very pretty picture that to write about; but we who work in the factory know the sober reality to be quite another thing altogether.
> After all, it is easier to write a book than it is to do right. It is easier to smooth over and plaster up a deep festering rotten system, which is sapping the life-blood of our nation, widening and deepening the yawning gulf which will ere long swallow up the laboring classes in dependent servitude and serfdom, like that of Europe, than it is to probe to the very bottom of this death-spreading monster.

Let us return to Ms. Farley. The letter Follett quotes comes from the *Offering* in 1840. It didn't take the mill women a long time to learn what they were in for. In later issue of the *Offering*, Farley wrote about two suicides at the factory. This is from Volume IV of the *Offering*, 1844, four years after the letter Follett used:

> She rose at early dawn, and toiled till night. Day after day brought the same wearisome round of duties; and, as she looked forward, she saw no prospect of a brighter future. It

> would take long years to procure an independence by her slight savings, and mayhap, with her sinking energies, she hardly gained a maintenance. Her spirits were gone, but life remained; and vitality seemed fixed upon her as a curse. The physical laws of her nature had not been violated, and nature still resisted the spirit's call for death. Perhaps it was frenzy, perhaps despondency, but—the rest is a short item in the common newspaper. ... How keen must have been those sufferings which could only find relief in the sleep of the grave?

FOREIGNERS

So much for Lowell. Now, as to Follett's first point. Every case for foreign sweatshops essentially hinges on the claim "These people are different than us."

Are the sweatshops of Asia hubs of feminism? Consider her argument: the factory, no matter how unpleasant, is a step up from the sticks. This is the classical trap of all sweatshop sellers: do you want to be stuck in tradition or stuck in oppression? Do you starve on the farm or starve on the factory? Notice how there's never a third option, "Cut the CEO's pay so the workers can feed their children." Why is that? Strange, how this never occurs to Cato.

According to an article in *Fast Company*, it would cost $1.50 to double the wages of those producing T-Shirts with a $27 cost.

You may ask, "What are the results of us not paying that extra $1.50?"

Maria Hengeveld wrote a feature for Slate last August: "Nike Boasts of Empowering Women Around the World — While the young women who make its products in Vietnam are intimidated, belittled, and underpaid."

Hengeveld explains what the company actually *does* is much different from what they *say*. "Workers still have nothing in Vietnam," said Chang Shin, 55, a Nike contractor worker, "Our lives are very difficult."

The sneaker giant has seventy-five factories contracted there. Eighty percent of those workers are female, as young as sixteen. And here is the genius salesmanship: "According to Nike, they are often 'the first women in their family to work in the formal economy.'" You can repackage underpaying your workforce as liberation, if you are careful.

Nike's employees live in what Hengeveld calls "squalid conditions near the factories" usually sharing rooms with two or five family members, with pay so low "they could not even meet the basic needs of their families, let alone save money or contribute to their communities." They get $200 a month, and need three or four times to make a basic level. "We have voices," a thirty-two-year-old pregnant worker told Hengeveld, "But we can't really speak." The women are routinely abused by management. Is this feminism?

The *Times* just published an editorial describing how wrong conservative economists have been about sweatshops:

> To our surprise, most people who got an industrial job soon changed their minds. A majority quit within the first months. They ended up doing what those who had not gotten the job offers did — going back to the family farm, taking a construction job or selling goods at the market. Contrary to the expert predictions (and ours), quitting was a wise decision for most. The alternatives were not so bad after all: People who worked in agriculture or market selling earned about as much money as they could have at the factory, often with fewer hours and better conditions.

In Bangladesh, the garment industry is about four million workers strong, in five thousand factories. Over 80% of the workers are female. Underage labor is common. They make about $68 a month. $23 billion was the industry takeaway in 2012-2013.

According to one article:

> ... staff as young as 13 are filmed in factories being kicked, slapped and hit with a used fabric roll as well as abused with physical threats and insults. Fire escapes at one factory, Vase Apparel, are shown padlocked, even though hundreds of garment workers have died in fires after being trapped in similar factories over the past few years.

Would you send your daughter to work in this place? Imagine her, bending over machines, hour after hour, being yelled at by cruel overseers, threatened for wanting dignity. Is this feminism?

In her piece for this publication, Carmen Bojanowski wrote about Shima Akhter, a 23-year-old garment worker in Dhaka:

> Though Akhter lives in Dhaka so she can get to work quickly, her young daughter cannot live with her because she doesn't have access to childcare in the city. Instead, she lives with Akhter's relatives in a small town outside Dhaka. The conditions in the garment factory she works in are too hot for a child to stay in for such long hours, so that nixes the idea of taking her daughter to work with her.

For the garment worker, life is filled with sexual harassment and threat of reprisal, overcrowding and stress injuries. There is an absence of safe drinking water, little in the way of health facilities. The Bangladeshi workers toil with dyes and bleaches, with Potassium Permanganate and sandblasting, which irritate the skin and the eyes and can lead to disease. According to the *Guardian*, synthetic indigo dyes are made from of coal tar and toxins, and are used in ninety percent of Chinese blue jeans. The outflows near denim factories in Xintang are soup-rich with cadmium, mercury, and a host of other brain-damaging neurotoxins. Textile workers get low pay and high cancer rates from their activities, due to the wonder-compound benzidine, which poisons the cells of the bladder and nose. Is this feminism?

There were large fires in 2012 and 1990 in Bangladesh factories. Hundreds of deaths. There was a textile factory fire in 2013 in the Mirpur industrial district. Eight deaths. Is this feminism? There is another company, Hannan Knitwear, where women work seven days each week, about thirteen hours a day. Sometimes it's until midnight—sixteen hours. Right now, there is a petition on Change.org to support these women. One of them, Kajol Rekha, gave birth last July. She couldn't tell her boss, or she'd have been fired.

On April 24, 2013, the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka District, Bangladesh collapsed on top of a factory of workers; 1,137 died and 1,000 were injured. It is the deadliest garment factory accident in history. The management was warned about the instability, about the cracks in the foundation, and did nothing, even as shops on the lower floors were shut down.

According to Barbara Briggs from the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights, the owner, Sohel Rana, changed what was intended to be a commercial building into an industrial institution. Rana built three more floors, storing generators, warehouses, and sewing machines. Per Briggs, Rana hired goons with sticks to keep the workers in line. The owners told their employees they would be docked a month's pay if they didn't come.

When the electricity went out 8:45 AM, the generators came on, the building vibrated, and down it went. It took days to bring out the survivors and bodies. Two hundred to three hundred are still missing, according to GLHR. Amputations and head injuries everywhere. Most of them were young women, aged eighteen to twenty-eight, working for twenty-six cents an hour. Among the brands manufactured there were Benetton and Walmart. Some of the workers had to drink their own urine while waiting for rescue. Is this feminism?

THIS IS NOT HOW JUSTICE WORKS

I assume Follett and Yglesias believe in a world where, somehow, worker protections and worker quality of life organically evolve through the good graces of the economy. But that's not how it works. Systems of exploitation do not mysteriously transform into functioning, safe workplaces. The social justice which Follett claims to favor cannot exist in those conditions. The only way feminism or any kind of equality occurs is when the mass of people organize and resist oppression. Worker rights are not a gift of the magical market; they must be fought for.

Which raises the question: why would anybody write these defenses of exploitation? I suspect they are not trying to convince the workers. They are not trying to convince the owners. So who are they trying to persuade?

You, Reader.

You are one of the people who has the power to make a difference in the lives of these women. This is the oldest trick in the book: how to dress up oppression for the classes who would reform it. In the story that Follett and Yglesias tell, there is one protagonist that matters: factory owners. Only their needs are considered. They are treated as a god or force of nature, not as a human-created phenomenon. Like a train we must let pass.

This philosophy is the opposite of feminism. It demands women shut up and take what they're offered. If being in a sweatshop is so goddamn wonderful, why don't these writers try it? Why doesn't Cato outsource its own justification of selfishness to Indian, or Indonesian, or Chinese writers? If they believe in their beloved market, surely they must agree with this process. I assure you, I will applaud the effort.