

Exploitation Defined

I've often encountered when in discussion of "sweatshops" the charge that those who own them are exploiting those they employ. But I think it all depends on one's definition of exploitation. The common definition is similar to: the act of employing to the greatest possible advantage. If that is all there is to exploitation, it is hardly objectionable.

We all exploit and are exploited everyday. For example, my employer has given me the greatest tools and training necessary to do my job. It is in my employer's best interest to do so as it gives him the greatest possible advantage in serving his customers. On the other hand, I have sought the greatest tools and training so as to give myself the greatest possible advantage over other employees or potential employees. So in short, we have exploited each other to our own advantage.

So why all the fuss over the supposed "exploitation" of sweatshop employees? It comes back to the definition of exploitation. If someone opens a widget factory in a third-world country, and then seeks employees who will voluntarily work for him for a mutually beneficial wage, then has the employer exploited his employees? No more than they have exploited him. What if someone opens a widget factory in a third-world country, and then seeks employees at gun point and uses force to keep them working? Then we have true exploitation, because the employees have lost their freedom.

And therein lies the confusion. If both parties to a transaction benefit, be it trade or employment, there is no evil exploitation. That's your variable. Let's look at sweatshops. Do those who work there benefit from doing so? Unless they have been forced to, then yes, they do.

Even if it's for \$5/day and shoddy conditions? Unless they have been forced to, then yes, they do. They wouldn't voluntarily work somewhere for so cheap a wage or under such conditions if it wasn't to their benefit. So should we be concerned and try to get sweatshop owners to close up? Absolutely not, as it would make those employees, who are currently benefiting, worse off.

I wouldn't work for \$5/day and under shoddy conditions. That's because I have better options. Those who choose to voluntarily work for \$5/day and under shoddy conditions currently do not have better options, or else they wouldn't. I believe a great evil is committed by those who fight to take away these options from those who need them. Every developed nation on Earth went through cheap labor and shoddy conditions. It's the only way that a third-world nation can progress.

I try to clarify these things when in discussion of "sweatshops". It's important to me that I'm on the good side and promote those things that better mankind. The term exploitation is thrown around by the ignorant to enrage the passions. It works, unfortunately. But so does logic and reason.

Written by Skyler J. Collins, June 2009.