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Vulgar Libertarianism at the NYT

And the Usual Suspects are Ticked Pink

Kevin Carson

June 12, 2006

Courtesy of Joel Schlosberg and P.M. Lawrence. Nicolas D. Kristof at the *New York Times* has recycled the “best available alternative” cliché in defense of sweatshops, and George Reisman’s as giddy as a schoolgirl.

I’ve repeatedly attempted to show just how bankrupt the “best available alternative” apology is, starting with *Vulgar Libertarianism Watch Part I*. But I recently stumbled across another example in Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*. She quotes Raymondo Nagrampa, the administrator of a “free trade” zone in the Philippines (a sort of industrial park for sweatshops):

They feel more comfortable just working in the factory line, for, after all, this is a marked improvement from the farm work that they’ve been accustomed to, where they were exposed to the sun. To them, for the lowly province rural worker, working inside an enclosed factory is better off than being outside.

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Klein, in interviews with sweatshop workers, met with universal outrage at Nagrampa's remarks:

"It's not human!" said Rosalie, a teenager whose job is installing the "backlights" in IBM computer screens. "Our rights are being trampled and Mr. Nagrampa says that because he has not experienced working in a factory and the conditions inside."

Salvador, in his 90210 T-shirt, was beside himself: "Mr. Nagrampa earns a lot of money and he has an air-conditioned room and his own car, so of course he would say that we prefer this work—it is beneficial to him, but not to us... Working on the farm is difficult, yes, but there we have our family and friends and instead of always eating dried fish, we have fresh food to eat."

Many other rural workers told me that they would have stayed home if they could, but the choice was made for them: most of their families had lost their farms, displaced by golf courses, botched land-reform laws and more export processing zones...

..."If we had land we would just stay there to cultivate the land for our needs," Raquel, a teenage girl from one of the garment factories, told me. "But we are landless, so we have no choice but to work in the economic zone even though it is very hard and the situation here is very unfair..."

In other words, exactly what the masters and owners of mankind have known ever since they figured out we could be milked like cattle for our surplus production: it's a lot easier to get "good help" when the producing classes are deprived of independent access to the means of production.

A few months ago, I got into a debate with some anonymous, historically illiterate cretin (aka "Guest") in a forum at flag.blackened.net, who said that Third Worlders choose sweatshop labor because they prefer it to "chasing a water buffalo up and down a rice paddy all day." When I argued the contrary—that the demonstrated preference has generally been to work one's own land whenever the choice was available—the idiot got demagogic about the "elitism" of "left-wing intellectuals" who think they know better than Third World peasants what they really want. Perhaps Guest should talk to some of those people Naomi Klein talked to. And then buy Mr. Nagrampa a beer; they seem to have a lot in common.