

APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND TO THE CALL FOR A TASK FORCE ON SWEATSHOP LABOUR

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The Prime Minister. The year 1997, the year of the agreement of the Apparel Industry Partnership with the US, initiated by Peter Dinklage, Clinton, and tried a similar process in Canada. In October 1997, a letter to the Hon. Jean Charest and the Prime Minister reiterated and elaborated on the request. A letter in March 1998 to the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Foreign Affairs asked for a strategy to achieve the purpose.

A petition supporting the call for a task force was signed, as of June 30, by 70,000 Canadians and over 200 national, regional and local groups. It expressed concern about the problem of sweatshop labour in the garment industry in Canada as well as other countries, and stated that retailers share responsibility with manufacturers for the treatment of workers producing goods sold under their labels and in their stores. The petition asked the government to convene a federal task force to include representation from legislators, manufacturers, labour and religious and human rights groups.

The Steelworkers Humanist Fund convened a "learning circle" on codes of conduct and labor law beginning in November 1997 with participants from 19 organizations: international development, human rights, social investment, social labelling and union. The project, titled "The Business of Change," examined a wide variety of domestic and international code and labelling initiatives. While its mandate did not permit a focus on the garment or textile sectors, its research and discussion included codes and labels which are likely to be relevant to the work of a task force on sweatshop labour.

The BC Federation of Labour, the CEP and the Steelworkers asked for discussions early in 1998 with Dyer, Hudson's Bay, Mark's Work Warehouse, Reitman's and Sears, and submitted firm shareholder proposals to the first four. (Sears' deadline for submission of proposals could not be met.) The proposal asked the retailers to support the call for a task force, and review company codes of conduct in the light of discussions of such a task force. Four companies (the exception was Reitman's) agreed to support "the formation of a multi-stakeholder group", but suggested that the scope be broadened beyond the apparel or garment industry to include other retail products. They also indicated that the Retail Council of Canada would provide leadership in the sector.

The Retail Council of Canada hosted a meeting in June to which it invited some unions, NGO and federal government representatives and indicated that its likely support for the call for a national task force.

Objectives. The objectives of the Labour Party and other condition for the task force are: - developing or strengthening civil society structures on labour rights, labour standards, and monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.