

No Case For Sweatshops

Fortune (Letters to Fortune), December 1996

It's hard to romanticize the exploitation of child labor, but in 'The Case for Sweatshops' (First, October 28) David Henderson tries. He suggests that the poor children abroad are lucky to be spending ten hours a day, six days a week, in unsafe, dreary sweatshops because otherwise they would starve. The same argument was used in the early part of this century to justify keeping poor American children in sweatshops.

The U.S. is supporting a new international program to take young children out of sweatshops and put them in schools. Greater access to education fuels economic growth and creates better choices than either the sweatshops or starvation.

ROBERT B. REICH

Secretary of Labor

Washington, D.C

David Henderson replies:

Secretary Reich et al. have no answer to my point that you hurt people, not help them, by stripping them of the best of their bad choices. Oxfam, the British charity, reported that when factory owners in Bangladesh were pressured to fire child laborers, thousands of them became prostitutes or starved. Reich may be right that schools are the answer. But then the proper solution is to offer that option to parents and children and let them choose.