

# Fair Wear Campaign and the Homeworkers' Code of Practice



In the 1980s and 1990s there was a dramatic growth in the number of homeworkers working in the Australian garment sector. By 1995 the number of homeworkers in Australia was estimated to be as high as 392,000 - many from migrant communities. These homeworkers worked informally and experienced low pay, long hours, and anxiety about their tax and social security situation. They were often too fearful to challenge their employers.

The Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFUA), witnessing the growth of homeworking and the poor working conditions, was committed to supporting these workers and finding ways to bring them into the union. The TCFUA recognised however that it could not organise these workers without an ongoing presence in the communities in which the homeworkers lived. So the TCFUA made links with community groups and began to develop leaders among the homeworkers.

The TCFUA became a link between community groups, religious bodies, women's organisations, social justice committees, aid organisations, national student unions and national and state institutions. This coalition launched the Fair Wear Campaign in 1997. The Fair Wear Campaign mobilised consumers to demand better conditions for workers. It exposed the labels that were being made under exploitative conditions.

When the Federal Government attempted to weaken the legal protections for workers the TCFUA launched a protest and information campaign. The TCFUA ensured homeworkers were involved in providing information and presenting evidence to the Industrial Relations Commission, and Commissioners went to homeworkers' homes to witness their situation first hand. The Commission decided the protections outlined in the awards system should remain, and this was a great victory for the clothing homeworkers.

The Fair Wear Campaign was having a real impact and in 1997 the Textile Fashion Industry of Australia and the TCFUA negotiated a Homeworkers' Code of Practice. Retailers and Manufacturers had to ensure that homeworkers sewing for their labels received minimum wages and the benefits and conditions required under the awards system. A vital feature was that the union was mandated to monitor working conditions.

The Australian Code of Practice is unique and presents an excellent model:

- It focuses on the specific problems of homeworkers
- It requires detailed information from companies and contractors
- It is monitored by the union.