



CALIFORNIA FASHION ASSOCIATION

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AS HEARD ON *NPR*

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Garment Industry Follows Threads Of Immigration Overhaul

By Sonari Glinton

LOS ANGELES — In Los Angeles, the business of fashion is big. The apparel business employs as many as 45,000 workers in L.A. County, many of them immigrants.

Consequently, the garment industry is worried about the outcome of the immigration debate and watching closely to see what happens.

'You Don't Have Another Choice'

One of the heavyweights is American Apparel, which makes more than 40 million articles of clothing each year out of its factory near downtown L.A.

The clothing industry is notorious for employing illegal workers. American Apparel was forced to fire nearly one-third of its workforce — 1,800 employees — after an immigration crackdown in 2009.

Priscila Rios, a sewer for the company, recently got her green card.

"I was lucky to get my paperwork in three years, but there are so many people that used to work here and had to leave because of the same reason, and they are still struggling every day just to find a decent job," she says.

Rios says she's worried about the dozens of friends and family who work at hidden sweatshops in and around Los Angeles where workers are often taken advantage of.

"And they just do it because they know your status. They know that you work there because you don't have another choice," Rios says. "And if we get immigration [reforms], those people will have to do what the law is requiring, and then the people there won't have to be fighting for their rights."

An Easier Path

Many in the garment industry want to see a clearer and shorter path to legal status than the current bill provides. Peter Schey, an immigration lawyer who works for American Apparel, says a shorter path to citizenship would improve conditions in an industry that relies on immigrant labor.

"[It] would rapidly decrease the exploitation of the immigrant communities, and at the same time that you decrease the exploitation you also decrease the appetite or the desirability of employers to hire undocumented or temporary labor," he says.

Ilse Metchek, head of the California Fashion Association, says current immigration policy has contributed to a larger underground economy in Los Angeles.

"We have lost within the past three years over 5,000 employees in legitimate, legal factories," she says.



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The new immigration bill offers a guest worker program for agricultural workers and other laborers, but there's no special carve-out for the garment industry or industrial workers, Metchek says.

"An industrial worker who has been here in this country working legitimately, paying taxes, should be able to have a green card or work permit to continue working," she says.

Metchek says the industry will suffer if there isn't an easier path for immigrant workers.

"You cannot take people out of the street and put them on a sewing machine and ask them to sew your shirt," she says. "There is training involved, and that training is expensive. That fabric is \$6 or \$7 a yard. You're not going to let somebody just play around with it."

Metchek says if the new immigration bill doesn't protect those skilled workers, the industry will lose them or they will just go underground.