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THE RIGHT TO WORK AT HOME

Wouldn't you think that the U.S. Government has enough to do that it wouldn't have time to swoop down on a couple of dozen women in Ripon, Wisconsin (the birthplace of the Republican Party) and charge that they are violating the law (oh, the horror of it all) by sewing garments in their homes and selling them? Yet, the Department of Labor is trying to put these women out of business because they work in their homes instead of a factory.

This Federal busybodyism is the result of a 1943 regulation which forbids work at home on women's clothing, embroidery, jewelry, gloves, mittens, buttons, buckles, and handkerchiefs.

The first rationale for the 1943 regulation is that "women need protection to ensure they get paid basic minimum wages." Apparently, nobody has told Secretary Ray Donovan that the "women need protection" argument is an obsolete stereotype; women should be presumed as capable as men of making their own contracts for services.

The second rationale for the 1943 regulation is that it is necessary to prevent unregulated "sweatshops" where employees work in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Since the women all work in their own homes, the "sweatshop" allegation is ridiculous; it's not the job of the government to tell us how clean to keep our own homes.

Those pushing for merciless enforcement of the regulation pretend to be worried about the "shoddy" merchandise produced in the homes. That's rather transparent; no business needs protection against its competitors' "shoddy" products; what's really worrying the complainers is that their competitors' products are better and cheaper.

Home work is a woman's issue because it is mostly women who are involved. Women with children to care for find it more practical, efficient, and loving to work around their children's schedules in their own homes than to punch a timeclock on a regular basis at a factory.

The women can adjust their work in quantity, in daily timing, and in seasonal timing to accommodate their family priorities. One of the women said, "The No. 1 reason for

doing a job like this is because you have children at home."

The issue first surfaced two years ago when the Department of Labor went after some New England women who knitted sweaters and caps to sell in their local ski industry. In order to get knitwear exempted from the regulation, some independent-minded grandmothers went lobbying in Washington at their own expense. They succeeded.

Now, the front line of this battle has moved to Wisconsin where a handful of women appliqué designs on sweaters, shirts, pants, and T-shirts in their own homes and sell the garments to a couple of female entrepreneurs who formed a business under the name The Silent Woman, Inc. The products are good and saleable; the women are happy and well paid.

When it comes to morals offenses (such as prostitution, homosexuality and pornography), the familiar liberal refrain is, "Government should not interfere with the activities of consenting adults." There has been a deafening silence from the liberal establishment about the consenting female adult seamstresses who sell to The Silent Woman, Inc. (and who are, obviously, not committing any morals offense).

It is possible that the couple of dozen Wisconsin women sewers are the vanguard of a changing society in which the so-called "cottage industries" will become a significant part of our economy. Future technology may make it possible for millions of women to leave office and factory and work profitably in their homes, where they can suit their own flexitime around their obligations to home and children.

Some futurists are predicting that by 1990, an estimated 15 million jobs can be done at home because the cost of electronic transmission of information will be so much less than the cost of commuting from home to office. One example of the radical decentralization of work would be that home terminals could replace typing pools at the office.

The list of products now forbidden to be produced in homes is so peculiar (e.g., women's clothing, but not men's clothing; gloves but not sweaters) that it could have been arrived at only by special-interest lobbying. When the government says it is OK for a Vermont woman to sell a sweater made in her home, but it is unlawful for a Wisconsin woman to sell a sweater after she has appliqued a design on it in her home, it sounds very much like a constitutional issue of Equal Protection. It's fortunate that the Wisconsin women have found a public interest law firm, the Center on National Labor Policy, to defend their rights.