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Daily News of Los Angeles (CA)

December 25, 1994

Section: EDITORIAL

Edition: Valley

Page: V6 Memo: Letters to the Editor.

PUBLIC FORUM

AVERAGE AMERICAN INSENSITIVE TO PLIGHT OF OTHERS

After describing the horror of a fire in a Thai toy factory, in which 188 workers died, Bob Herbert reckons that "few American parents would not be troubled" by knowledge of the dangerous - and often fatal - foreign work environments in which toys for the giant U.S. toy companies are made. ("Terror in toyland should outrage American buyers," Daily News, Dec. 23).

Bob, Bob, Bob - how to break it to you gently? No more than their corporate compatriots do average American parents give a tinker's damn about such matters. Indeed, the average American parent is a social Darwinist at heart.

I lost count long ago of the discussions in which expressions of sympathy for exploited workers were followed by a quick change of subject when the issue of personal action to help level the playing field arose. To my comment that any of us might have found ourselves in the position of the exploited, the response was either a complacent observation that some of us are just luckier than others, or the fatuous assertion that the exploited can always find a way out if they really want to. This latter claim was usually attended by a palpable smugness.

Social Darwinism does not prevent its adherents from crying "foul" when their own interests appear threatened, however. Not long ago, our bargaining unit representative - an average American parent - handed me a copy of the unit newsletter, filled with exaggerated complaints about how badly we were being treated. "I'm trying to build some solidarity around here," he said.

"I have a radically different idea of solidarity than yours," I responded. "If I had asked you to boycott grapes when I was working on behalf of farm workers, you all would have laughed at me and made jokes about it."

"I'm sure you're right," he said, and moved on.

Herbert's heart is in the right place, and I applaud him for that. Nonetheless, I hope that he will refrain from making us liberals look naive by projecting his own concern for others onto the body politic in general.

- Bill Becker

Woodland Hills