

AT WORK

The battle over cottage industries

Manufacturers of certain kinds of goods—from knitted outerwear, handkerchiefs and embroideries to jewelry and fireworks—violate government labor regulations if they use materials produced by people who do the work in their homes, even if they call themselves independent contractors. Dating from the 1940s, those regulations are intended to protect factory workers' jobs from competition from sweatshop operators and others who might otherwise exploit poorly paid home workers.

That seems fair enough. But those long-standing rules are now clashing with the desire of a growing number of people to run home businesses.

"Nineteen eighty-four is not 1942," says Marion Behr, president of the National Alliance of Homebased Businesswomen. She says women are working at home in more than 200 occupations and earning incomes that range from pin money to six figures annually. Yet government regulations would cost these women their jobs, says Behr.

Her organization supports a bill that would modify the home-work ban. In her testimony before a Senate committee, Behr read a letter from a home-based fashion designer, a graduate of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, who sews in her home and contracts work to other home seamstresses.

The fashion designer wrote, "If I could find a job in Manhattan at my age (53), I could expect to earn no more than \$225 a week. . . . My take-home pay would have to cover weekly commuting costs and lunches. This would leave me \$50 a week to 'fritter away' on college tuitions and medical expenses for our epileptic daughter. . . . The Fair Labor Standards Act discriminates against me and against the women who earn money through me."



Behr: Government regulations are costing women their jobs.

The Labor Department wants to lift at least some bans against work at home. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union supports the bans, and in mid March the U.S. Supreme Court let stand an appeals court ruling in favor of the bans. Now Congress will wrestle with the issue.

Help for people changing careers

A change of careers, whether done by choice or necessity, can be an agonizing and frustrating experience.

There are agencies that can help. You can find out about them through city and state labor departments and community organizations, such as the United Way.

In Boston the Bay State Skills Corp., created by the Massachusetts legislature, brings together businesses and educational organizations to teach skilled workers—especially those whose existing jobs are being changed or eliminated by new technologies—new skills that are in demand. The BSSC places 86% of its graduates in new jobs in healthy industries.

For some people, career change is coupled with retirement. They don't

need a paycheck, but they do need to stay busy at a worthwhile pursuit. The Second Careers program of the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center in New York City matches skills of retirees to the needs of nonprofit agencies. Through that program, for instance, Sylvia Lew, who had been a buyer and a teacher, took on a volunteer job leading tours of schoolchildren through the American Museum of Natural History.

You can't tell a job by its collar now

You're either a blue-collar worker or a white-collar worker, right? Not according to the latest word from the U.S. Department of Labor. It has tossed out those terms, which were long used to classify occupations.

They are outmoded and misleading, says the government. For example, both an untrained high school graduate with a low-paying clerical job and a college professor were considered white-collar workers.

Under the Labor Department's new designations, the clerical worker is in the "technical, sales and administrative support" group, while the college professor is classified under the "managerial and professional specialty" group. The other new designations: "operators, fabricators and laborers" and "precision production, craft and repair."

Jobs for students overseas

Working overseas for a few weeks or months can be a valuable experience for students and perhaps boost their careers with U.S. companies later. And U.S. firms that take on foreign student workers may eventually want to hire some of them for work in the students' home countries.

This mesh of interests finds a clearinghouse in the International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience and the International Association of Students in Economics and Commerce.