THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
Johns Hopkins University • Baltimore, MD

Volume 3 Article 39

2022

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Recommended Citation

Bandy, Rae (2022). ""What Do You Know About Hems, Charlie?": It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia and Garment Sweatshops." *The Macksey Journal*: Volume 3, Article 39.

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Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2022

"What Do You Know About Hems, Charlie?": *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and Garment Sweatshops

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Abstract

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia's social commentary is one of the hallmarks of the series as it strives to address controversial issues such as race, gun control, and LGBT rights with absurdist and satirical humor. However, some episodes delve into historical commentary, giving the show's comedy more nuance. This is true of the episode "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo," in which Dee Reynolds's aspirations to become a fashion designer and show up her successful friend turns into a sweatshop operation. This sweatshop greatly resembles those of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, yet the relevance lies in how sweatshops are still operated today. This paper seeks to explore the history of garment sweatshops and their evolution as well as the roles that each character plays in the historical representation. In doing so, it is revealed that *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* creates a strong historical representation of the garment industry sweatshops through assigned character roles and historical similarities that support the characters' roles in the labor output. It is found that Frank and Mac play the role of the sweatshop bosses, Dee and Charlie are the exploited floor workers, and Dennis and Ingrid Nelson are the fashion designers responsible for sourcing their labor. Therefore, It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia succeeds in depicting a humorous yet realistic sweatshop that ends in a labor movement resembling those of the twentieth century. Such labor movements coincide with the "slow fashion" movements of the twenty-first century, which emerged around the time of the episode airing, making the conversation even more timely to the movements the show seeks to explore.

Keywords: *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia,* garment history, Jewish history, labor movements, media history, historical fiction analysis, slow fashion, sweatshops, Jewish labor movements, 20th century American history

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia's social commentary is one of the hallmarks of the series as it strives to address controversial issues such as race, gun control, and LGBT rights with absurdist and satirical humor. However, some episodes delve into historical commentary, giving the show's comedy more nuance. This is true of the episode "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo," in which Dee Reynolds's aspirations to become a fashion designer and show up her successful friend turns into a sweatshop operation. This sweatshop greatly resembles those of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, yet the relevance lies in how sweatshops are still operated today. This paper seeks to explore the history of garment sweatshops and their evolution as well as the roles that each character plays in the historical representation. In doing so, it is revealed that *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* creates a strong historical representation of the garment industry sweatshops through assigned character roles and historical similarities that support the characters' roles in the labor output. It is found that Frank and Mac play the role of the sweatshop bosses, Dee and Charlie are the exploited floor workers, and Dennis and Ingrid Nelson are the fashion designers responsible for sourcing their labor. Therefore, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* succeeds in depicting a humorous yet realistic sweatshop that ends in a labor movement resembling those of the twentieth century. Such labor movements coincide with the "slow fashion" movements of the twenty-first century, which emerged around the time of the episode airing, making the conversation even more timely to the movements the show seeks to explore.

To begin, it is important to understand the television show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and its unique use of humor and comedy. The show has never shied away from controversial topics; scholars have pointed at child molestation, racial politics, and abortion as just a few that the show has covered in just its first season. Meg James of the *Los Angeles Times* notes of two episodes that describe this type of humor and its uniqueness. "The comedy was unlike anything seen on TV," she says. "In 'Charlie Wants an Abortion,' they get into the abortion debate. McElhenney's character, Mac, joins up with female anti-abortion activists simply to score. In 'Underage Drinking: A National Concern,' the gang realize their new customers are high school students. Instead of kicking them out, Mac decides 'we have a social responsibility to provide a safe haven for these kids to be kids.' Solution: Serve watered-down drinks."[1] By tackling these issues in such an over-the-top way, the television show opened up new possibilities for how characters and situations operate. The characters of Charlie, Dennis, Dee, Frank, and Mac (known as "the gang") are morally reprehensible people with few redeeming qualities, yet viewers have tuned in enough to earn the show a record-breaking fifteen seasons on FX. Jake Smasal of the University Wire praises this and justifies viewership by saying that "what really continues to set *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* apart is the characters. Dennis, Mac, Sweet Dee, Charlie, and Frank continue to sink to new lows (new highs?)."[2] One of the most unique things about this show is that the audience is not supposed to root for these characters. They are not supposed to win, otherwise, the systems of oppression (such as sweatshops) win.

The writers do this intelligently by exaggerating situations and creating outlandish scenarios in which the characters find themselves failing again and again. The pilot episode,

[1] James, "COMPANY TOWN; A Low-Budget Hit; 'It's Always Sunny' Is Lighting a Path for Scripted TV's Survival."
[2] Smasal, "'It's Always Sunny' Finds Lasting Comic Success Where Others Fail."

"The Gang Gets Racist," makes this clear from the show's inception. Kenneth Ladenburg, a Ph.D. scholar on writing and rhetoric, explains the racial humor used in the episode. "The situational humor performed in *It's Always Sunny* and the strategic use of tension employed by its cast members critiques the border between socially sanctioned and socially unacceptable discourses of race and works rhetorically to inform viewers of the manifold, and often unseen, ways in which racial prejudice is expressed and defended." This tension is apparent across the episodes, including "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo," and sets the show's dark humor apart from shows such as *South Park* and *Family Guy*. At the end of the day, the audience knows that these are terrible people who are not to be emulated, yet they are placed into a special situation in which they sympathize with the struggles of these horrible people and can laugh at their antics. This is what makes the show so successful, and its long run has provided for many commentary episodes on social issues, including garment sweatshops.

Sweatshops, particularly garment industry sweatshops that *Its's Always Sunny* analyzes, are a relatively new phenomenon that began to rise during the Victorian era. The Victorian era saw industrialization and consumerism sweep Western Europe and the United States, and this consumerism included clothing. Sweatshops became a way of creating ready-made garments of poor quality, usually for sailors, slaves, and other hard laborers. The term "sweatshop" comes from the boss' need for labor and goods to "sweated" from the exploited workers, usually immigrant women, to fit a narrow profit margin[3]. These poorly made garments were eventually expanded to include a greater marker of middle to upper-class people, and the massive influx of immigration to the United States during the late nineteenth century aided in meeting the labor demands. Many of these laborers were Jewish women who had immigrated to the US from shtetls, which are small, Jewish villages in Eastern Europe. They were able to find work in the garment industry because sewing was a basic skill all women were taught. Before this massive industrialization, it was important to know how to mend and keep clothes, as they were not as readily available in shops and markets.

Although thousands of these Jewish women were a part of this industry, many of their stories have gone unrecorded due to a lack of literacy among early twentieth-century garment workers. However, Rose Cohen's memoir has become a quintessential narrative about Jewish women in the garment industry. After learning to read and write while in a hospital, she wrote her book, *Out of the Shadow: a Russian Jewish girlhood on the Lower East Side*, which describes her immigration to the United States and employment in the garment industry.

> I liked my work and learned it easily, and father was pleased with me. As soon as I knew how to baste pocketflaps he began to teach me how to baste the coat edges. This was hard work. The double ply of overcoat cloth stitched in with canvas and tape made a very stiff edge. My fingers often stiffened with pain as I rolled and basted the edges. Sometimes a needle or two would break before I could do one coat. Then father would offer to finish the edge for me. But if he gave me my choice I never let him. At these moments I wanted so to master the thing myself that I felt my whole body trembling with the desire. And with my habit of personifying things, I used to bend over the coat on my lap, force the

[3] Soyer, "Garment Sweatshops, Then and Now," 36

obstinate and squeaking needle, wet with perspiration, in and out of the cloth and whisper with determination: "No, you shall not get the best of me !"[4]

Cohen's story is one of the best historical records of late 19th and early twentieth-century garment work, with her experiences representing much of what seamstresses and other sweatshop workers saw. The long hours, mistreatment, and hard labor are reflected in the sweatshop industry today with medical researchers reporting hazardous conditions and health problems emerging among the workers.

Just as Cohen complained of stiff fingers, Bangladeshi sweatshop workers today are experiencing documented musculoskeletal disorders due to their repetitive motions and poor working conditions. According to Alamgir, Cooper, and Delclos, "employment in garment, shoe manufacturing, textile, and weaving factories have highlighted adverse working conditions to include crowded workspaces, poor lighting and air quality, and a variety of ergonomic hazards, such as repetitive movements, awkward postures, and piecemeal work. Irrespective of gender, one study conducted in-depth interviews with 110 garment workers across 11 factories in Bangladesh and workers reported substandard wages, long work hours, job insecurity, physical and verbal abuse, and even calorie deficiency."[5] Sweatshop conditions are not just a historical problem; they continue to mark the garment industry today, just as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* shows in "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo."

Poor quality is one of the many issues with sweatshop-made clothing, but it can also be indicative of larger labor issues. Dress historian and seamstress Bernadette Banner recreated a medieval dress entirely by hand using historical methods and materials that cost her at least $200 just in materials. When a fast-fashion company took her design and resold it, the result was sloppy and disregarded the history behind the original garment. This sloppy craftsmanship also tells us that the garment was made using exploited labor. The stitch length and use of overlocking are huge indicators because, as seen in the episode, the priority was speed rather than creating well-crafted garments. Using a longer stitch length quickens the sewing process, and overlocking technique is used to finish seams in a way that does not ensure their longevity.[6] In terms of labor, if a garment is being made using quick, shortcut techniques, then it is usually because the employees are being forced to work faster in order to churn out as many garments as possible with little regard to labor ethics.

These labor ethics do not just put consumers at risk; they have been putting workers at risk since the early twentieth century. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fires are just one example of the multiple factory fires that have occurred throughout the century. These hazardous conditions still occur in sweatshops today as reported by Alamgir et al. Ultimately, all of these workers and their positions have continued in their paces, with the bosses seemingly apathetic to the labor divides around them and the workers at risk of exploitation.

In "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo," we see several of these workers represented by the different characters. At the start of the plot, Mac and Frank take on the roles of the sweatshop bosses with both using systems from across the twentieth and 21st

[4] Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: a Russian Jewish girlhood on the Lower East Side,* 84

[5] Alamgir, Cooper, and Delclos, "Garments Fire."

[6] Banner, *Buying a Knockoff of My Own Dress: An Educated Roast (Actual Fire Used for Scientific Purposes)*.

centuries in order to keep their employees in check. For example, Mac uses a steam whistle and "German war propaganda" in order to keep the employees in line. Frank instructs Mac on how to manipulate other employees while reminiscing about his days running a sweatshop in Vietnam. This demonstrates their arbitrary power over their employees, which labor historian, David Soyer, identifies as a defining characteristic of a sweatshop. Soyer goes on to say that "many bosses...anxious about maintaining their own tenuous positions in the industry hierarchy, lorded [their power] over their employees in a harsh and arbitrary way," and even goes as far as to call them "paternalistic exploiters."[7] This is most visible when Mac and Frank set up a partition between them and the employees, demonstrating a perceived power that they have over the employees.

> Mac: I gotta say, Frank, I'm really happy about this partition.
> Frank: I can't tell you how many memories this brings back…This is exactly the way I ran my sweatshops…You have to separate them from us…They need to be trained.[8]

While their side of the partition has multiple fans, the sewers are profusely sweating and struggling to sew. They also plan out how to dehumanize their employees, particularly Charlie, who is treated like a dog and "trained" throughout the entire episode.

Sexual harassment from bosses is also a universal fear among garment workers from the late 19th century to the present day, specifically for women like Cohen. Daniel Bender notes in his article, "Too Much Distasteful Masculinity," that "one of the most important insights of the recent cultural and gender turn in working-class history is the idea that social constructions of what it means to be a manly worker are integral to how skill is defined and how this definition helps maintain hierarchies of pay and prestige."[9] This power dynamic is evident between Charlie, Dee, Mac, and Frank, with Mac and Frank using their power over their workers until they strike, reflecting the abuses and social revolutions that have come out of the garment industry. These social revolutions have led to massive labor reforms in the United States, yet these same situations continue to occur abroad.

Dee and Charlie, as the floor workers, are forced into horrible conditions in which they are overworked and forced to forfeit their creativity and wellbeing alongside other Eastern European workers. However, in "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo," Dee, revolutionizes many of these workers, just as Jewish women did after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and other disasters. Dee's actions are a direct reflection of the revolutionary women who staged strikes for better workplace conditions, although her motives were vainer than those in reality. While Dee was motivated to stage a strike out of jealousy for Ingrid Nelson, other women have staged strikes to protest unsafe conditions, such as Clara Lemlich, a shirtwaist who ordered a strike in 1909 as documented in Susan Glenn's *Daughters of the Shtetl.*

> In her native Yiddish, Lemlich told the packed meeting hall, 'I am a working girl, one of those who are on strike against intolerable working conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms.' When Lemlich moved that a

[7] Soyer, "Garment Sweatshops, Then and Now," 35, 39
[8] Savage, "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo."
[9] Bender, "Too Much of Distasteful Masculinity"

> general strike be declared, the crowd lept to its feet and cheered wildly. No one, not the [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union] nor Lemlich nor the other officers of Local 25, anticipated the emotional outpouring of support for the general strike that began the next morning. Fifteen thousand shirtwaist workers walked off the job, and their numbers nearly doubled in the weeks that followed.[10]

By speaking in Yiddish, Lemlich was able to unite the shirtwaist workers through their shared culture and ethnicity, and the strike was considered a success through its thousands of participants across New York City.

Similarly, Bangladeshi labor leader, Nazma Akter, has called for corporate and consumer responsibility for sweatshop conditions in her country. In an interview, she declares that "we will not accept [these conditions]. They should come to us and work together to improve working conditions and not kill the workers."[11]

This rhetoric is echoed by Dee when she calls her fellow workers to strike, saying "You know what? Ladies! We're outta here! No. We don't need this! Let's go! We got a whole box of knockwurst up there. A big pot of it!... I'm staging a strike. Let's go!"[12] By using the same calls to action that Akter and Lemlich used, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* places Dee in the position of being a social activist, calling for strikes and demanding that those contributing to the sweatshop be held accountable. Although Dee is not entirely innocent in this episode, her actions are more aligned with the socially conscious labor organizers who seek to create better working conditions for those they work with. She is equal to her coworkers, not a superior, and succeeds in creating a strike that shut down Frank and Mac's operations.

Another significant floor employee is Charlie Kelly, a character who is constantly poked fun at for his suggestable, ignorant, and manipulatable nature. A constant theme in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is "Charlie Work" as shown in Season 10, Episode 4. Charlie is subjected to cruel treatment from the rest of the gang due to his job, which is taking care of menial and janitorial duties around the bar, and he is often left out of schemes due to the perception that he "wouldn't understand."[13] Charlie is known to be easily manipulated, as shown in "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo," in which Mac and Frank manipulate Charlie into doing sweatshop work. We see this with Charlie in which he is literally treated like a dog and forced to churn out dress after dress under the impression that he will be punished for taking a break.

> Mac: Charlie, sit.
> Charlie: Don't tell me to sit, dude.
> Mac: You want a treat? I think I got some jerky here... I do have some jerky in my pocket. Do you want some? Yeah. Yeah? Yeah? You sure? You want some? Yeah. Wait for it. Sit. Shake. Speak.
> Charlie: I would like some jerky, please.
> Mac: Good boy!

[10] Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*., 168
[11] Akter, "A View from the Sweatshop Floor: A CONVERSATION WITH BANGLADESHI LABOR LEADER NAZMA AKTER," 42
[12] Savage, "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo."
[13] Shakman, "Charlie Work."

This exchange not only solidifies Charlie's place as an exploited worker, but it also perpetuates the notion that Mac holds onto arbitrary power by mistreating his employees.

At the beginning of the episode, it is revealed that Charlie is quite skilled in sewing, Frank and Mac take advantage of his skills as he produces substandard garments at quick paces. This mirrors Bernadette Banner's argument that poor craftsmanship is often a sign of exploited laborers, which comes at a head after the introduction of the German war propaganda, designed to make the employees work faster. Charlie, frazzled and confused, continues to work as he rants to Dee that "things have changed around here. [Frank and Mac are] running this place like a concentration camp. We shouldn't even be talking right now! I think you better sit down and get to work. It's bad. The situation is bad! Oh, my God! They're watching us, Dee. They're always watching us." This occurs after the sweatshop receives an order of one hundred dresses, requiring the workers to work more quickly under more and more terrible conditions.[14] This quick pace once again creates terrible garments and leads to Dee's strike.

Charlie's role as a floor worker also represents the gender divide between men and women in the sweatshops, as Charlie is the only man sewing. However, according to Glenn, the garment trade in Jewish Europe was ruled by gender binaries. However, this changed with the immigration to the United States as many men began taking on this labor alongside women. "Definitions of men's and women's work were inconsistent and contradictory, varying from one branch of clothing manufacturer to the next, from city to city, and across ethnic groups."[15] Therefore, it makes sense for Charlie to be on the floor and is historically accurate to the situation presented. However, most sweatshop floor workers today are women due to "naturalization of skill," which, according to Jane Collins, argues that women are more naturally suited for some skills, such as sewing.[16] Therefore, this is more representative of early twentieth-century sweatshops rather than contemporary ones, where a sharp gender divide is seen. Charlie and Dee are meant to juxtapose each other in this sense with Dee being loud, assertive, and ungovernable and Charlie being easily exploited. The two characters play off of each other in a way that highlights the experiences of floor employees such as Rose Cohen.

However, the responsibility also lies outside of the sweatshops with designers and consumers acting as the starting point for where clothing production begins and ends. The "designer" characters of Dennis and Ingrid Nelson take vastly different approaches in sourcing their clothing. Dennis is happy to create greater quantities of clothing while sacrificing quality and labor ethics while Ingrid, as a boutique owner, takes careful consideration into the designs and garments she comes across. She even refuses Dennis's designs due to their poor quality. This dress, which is made unsustainably using sweatshop labor, does not properly fit the model because the inherent design was terribly flawed. He then berates the model for her body, saying "The dress is the right size. I wish we could say the same thing about your body? My

[14] Savage, "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo."
[15] Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*.
[16] Collins, "Mapping a Global Labor Market."

God. What did you eat? The entire kitchen cupboard today?"[17] Not only does Dennis shame his model for her body size, he takes part in the cycle of sweatshop labor.

This consumption is historically a feminist issue, especially given the long history of women's mistreatment in sweatshops. McRobbie criticizes "cultural feminists" for engaging in this consumer culture, arguing that fashion is a feminist issue. She continues to argue that reintegrating consumptions and production processes will at least ease the consumer/feminist tensions.[18] This is supported by Fredrica Rudell's research which reveals a trend in shoppers wanting to consume ethically. "Polls indicate that many U.S. consumers are concerned about sweatshops and the use of child labor and may be willing to pay a premium for assurances that their products are ethically produced."[19] These polls and studies support Ingrid's business model as a boutique, which represents a rise in sustainable fashion trends. This is when clothes are made in small-scale efforts rather than in large-scale manufacturing processes, as McRobbie describes.

Ingrid's workspace shows knowledge of proper clothing design with sketches and garments strewn about. This indicates that she crafts many of these garments herself or with a small team, which is supported by the fact that the items in her store do not appear to be identical. This also hints that Ingrid is a part of slow fashion culture, which seeks to undo the damage that the fashion industry has caused with unsustainable materials and sweatshop labor. "While the hand made is much more labor-intensive and inevitably more expensive than the machine-made, certainly if the workers are to be paid a fair wage, [the] association with designers has enabled the products to find consumers who can afford them, and who will also value them."[20] While these sustainable garments found in boutiques are more expensive, they are "an investment" as Banner describes.

This is not meant to shame those who cannot afford to invest in ethically made clothing, in fact, it is worth noting that several of these slow fashion designers do take part in social causes. One example is "Sari, a London based organization that employs a specific cultural domain within the indigenous Indian community. Since its launch in 2002, it has recycled saris into accessories to raise money for children in developing countries." These are the same developing countries that experience sweatshop labor at higher rates[21].

Bernadette Banner explains this cycle as she analyzes the reproduction of her historically inspired dress. Fast fashion companies, such as the one that manufactured the copy of the dress, do not properly research the items of clothing that they wish to make and instead base their design choices off of photographs that are often used without the creators' permission.

> The trouble with these mass manufacturers is that when they produce clothing, they're producing clothing based off of an image, based off of…someone's stolen Instagram picture. When designers, when artists, when seamstresses and actual craftspeople design clothes, they're designing with the human body in mind, not

[17] Savage, "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo."
[18] McRobbie, "Bridging the Gap."
[19] Rudell, "Shopping with a Social Conscience," 293
[20] Clark, "SLOW + FASHION—an Oxymoron—or a Promise for the Future …?," 432
[21] Clark., 434

> with a preexisting photograph in mind. So, the original garments obviously are made for people and they're made to be worn and are made to be flattering.[22]

This is the same issue that Dennis faced with his dress; his designs were based entirely on "pictures of women with giant breasts," as Ingrid put it when she refused his design. By basing his design off of a poorly-conceived image, Dennis becomes the fast-fashion company that is willing to sacrifice quality and worker safety for the sake of a garment. Ingrid, on the other hand, is the new wave of twenty-first-century fashion designers who take quality over quantity and refuse sweatshop practices.

During the 1909 strikes, a Jewish woman wrote to *Life & Labor* saying "we want stories that tell of struggle, and that tell of people who want justice passionately."[23] While the gang certainly does not strive for justice, this woman's call for a harsher and less pleasant tone in reports about the strikes mirrors *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*'s attitudes towards social issues perfectly. While analyzing the complex topic of garment sweatshops, the gang takes an abrasive and clever approach with its quintessential absurdist humor that only serves to dramatize the historical situation that they put themselves in. By producing an over-the-top depiction of the garment industry and showing all sides of the production process, "The Aluminum Monster vs. Fatty Magoo" succeeds in representing a historical situation and the harsh realities it presents. This historical situation, however, has remained relevant, making the episode both a historical and contemporary social commentary, with resources to support the gang's creation, support, and dismantling of their very own sweatshop.

[22] Banner, *Buying a Knockoff of My Own Dress: An Educated Roast (Actual Fire Used for Scientific Purposes)*. Akter, "A View from the Sweatshop Floor: A Conversation with Bangladeshi Labor Leader Nazma Akter." Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*., 191

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