

Kitchen Mittens

With all the attention paid these days to the plight of working mothers, one might expect considerable support for a proposal that would permit poor women with young children to work at home. But at hearings the other day before the House labor standards subcommittee, Labor Secretary Raymond Donovan received nothing but abuse for his decision to allow homework in the jewelry, knitted outerwear, glove and mittens, button and buckle, embroidery, handkerchief and women's clothing industries.

Mr. Donovan plans to repeal the Labor Department's 40-year prohibition of homework in these industries. As evidence of the ban's absurdity, he cites its recent application to a group of Vermont mothers who made more than the minimum wage and were able to save on baby-sitting and transportation costs by knitting ski caps at home.

But unions and companies alike in the garment industry are up in arms. If homework were legal, says the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, it wouldn't take place mostly in bucolic Vermont. It would mostly take place in the dank and crowded kitchens of New Jersey tenements, of Chicago slums, of southern California barrios. The dispersion of workplaces would make it harder to enforce minimum wage, child labor and working conditions laws, and make it easier for manufacturers to hire illegal aliens who because of their status would be unable to complain to law enforcers.

The established apparel companies, for their part, are afraid that their prices will be undercut by fly-by-night outfits that violate the labor laws. And both unions and companies

are disturbed that the proliferation of workplaces will occur at the same time that Mr. Donovan plans to cut back the number of labor standards inspectors.

These objections have considerable merit. A smaller inspectorate would most likely concentrate its resources on established factories rather than barging in on people's homes. And even though we oppose minimum wage and other labor laws that increase unemployment among the unskilled, it would certainly be unfair to enforce those laws selectively.

At the same time, it's worth keeping in mind a few things about union and company opposition. One of the principal reasons unions dislike homework is that it makes it much harder to organize workers. And one shouldn't take at face value all the union rhetoric about the exploitation of illegal aliens in sweatshop working conditions; in most cases, if the unions had their druthers, those aliens wouldn't have jobs at all. On the company side, there may be a fear of new competition in products where homework is more efficient.

What's more, there's something a bit peculiar about referring to "sweatshop" conditions in people's homes. The tenements of Elizabeth, N.J., may not be very pleasant, but thousands of people, after all, do live there. In the case of poor women with young children, there is often no alternative but to remain at home. Removing the ban on homework in the garment industry is one way to help welfare mothers free themselves from dependency on the state, and to help working mothers devote more of their attention to their families.