

Sweat, fire and ethics

The sweatshop is back. Bob Jeffcott argues that citizenship is more likely to get rid of it than shopping.

To use the Fairtrade Cotton label, a company does have to provide evidence that factory conditions downstream from the cotton farms are being monitored by a third party; but the kind of factory audits currently being carried out by commercial social-auditing firms are notoriously unreliable. In other words, my organic, Fairtrade Cotton certified T-shirt could have been sewn in a sweatshop by a 15-year-old girl who's forced to work up to 18 hours a day for poverty wages under dangerous working conditions. So what's a consumer to do?

Well, maybe we could start by admitting the limitations of ethical shopping. Isn't it a little presumptuous of us to think that we can end sweatshop abuses by just changing our individual buying habits? After all, such abuses are endemic to the garment industry and almost as old as the rag trade itself.

The term 'sweatshop' was coined in the United States in the late 1800s to describe the harsh discipline and inhuman treatment employed by factory managers, often in subcontract facilities, to sweat as much profit from their workers' labour as was humanly possible.

Sweatshop became a household word at the beginning of the 20th century when the tragic death of over a hundred garment workers became headline news in the tabloid press across the US. On 25 March 1911, a fire broke out on the ninth floor of the Asch Building in New York City, owned by the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Unable to escape through the narrow aisles between crowded sewing machines and down the building's only stairway, 146 young workers burned to death, suffocated, or leapt to their doom on to the pavement below. Firefighters and bystanders who tried to catch the young women and girls in safety nets were crushed against the pavement by the falling bodies.

Globalization and free trade

In the decades that followed, government regulation and union organizing drives – particularly in the post-World War Two period – resulted in significant improvements in factory conditions. This period, in which many – but not all – garment workers in North America enjoyed stable, secure employment with relatively decent working conditions, was short-lived.

Globalization and free trade changed all that. To lower production costs, garment companies began to outsource the manufacture of their products to subcontract

Cotton SWEATSHOPS

factories owned by Asian manufacturers in Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan. Companies like Nike became 'hollow manufacturers' whose only business was designing fashionable sportswear and marketing their brands. Other retailers and discount chains followed Nike's lead, outsourcing to offshore factories. Competition heightened. Asian suppliers began to shift their production to even lower-wage countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa. A race to the bottom for the lowest wages and worst working conditions went into high gear.

Today, countries like Mexico and Thailand are facing massive worker layoffs because production costs are considered too high. While most production is shifting to China and India, other poor countries like Bangladesh attract orders due to bargain-basement labour costs.

On 11 April 2005, at one o'clock in the morning, a nine-storey building that housed the Spectrum Sweater and Shahriar Fabrics factories in Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed, killing 64 workers, injuring dozens and leaving hundreds unemployed. Just 16 hours before the building crumbled, workers complained that there were cracks in the structure's supporting columns. Despite the lack of

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an adequate foundation and the apparent lack of building permits, five additional storeys had been added. To make matters worse, heavy machinery had been placed on the fourth and seventh floors.

The Spectrum factory produced clothes for a number of major European retailers, all of whose monitoring programmes failed to identify the structural and health-and-safety problems.

'Negligence was the cause of the 11 April tragedy,' said Shirin Akhter, president of the Bangladeshi women workers' organization, Karmojibi Nari. 'This was a killing, not an accident.'

In February and March 2006 there were four more factory disasters in Bangladesh, in which an estimated 88 young women and girls were killed and more than 250 were injured. Most of the victims died in factory fires, reminiscent of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, in which factory exits were either locked or blocked.

Twelve years ago, when we started the Maquila Solidarity Network, the word 'sweatshop' had fallen out of common usage. When we spoke to high school and

university assemblies, students were shocked to learn that their favourite brand-name clothes were made by teenagers like themselves, forced to work up to 18 hours a day for poverty wages in unsafe workplaces.

Badly tarnished brands

Students who had proudly worn the Nike swoosh wrote angry letters to Nike CEO Phil Knight declaring they would never again wear clothes made in Nike sweatshops. But the big brands weren't the only villains: the clothes of lesser-known companies were often made in the same factories or under even worse conditions.

Twelve years later, the Nike swoosh and other well-known brands are badly tarnished, and the word 'sweatshop' no longer needs explaining to young consumers. Companies like Nike and Gap Inc are publishing corporate social responsibility reports, acknowledging that serious abuses of worker rights are a persistent problem throughout their global supply chain.

Today some major brands have 'company code of conduct compliance staff' who answer abuse complaints almost immediately, promising to investigate the situation and report back on what they are willing to do to 'remediate' the problems.

Yet, despite such advances, not much really changes at the workplace. On the one hand, a little less child labour, fewer forced pregnancy tests or health-and-safety violations in the larger factories used by the major brands. But, on the other hand, poverty wages, long hours of forced overtime and mass firings of workers who try to organize for better wages and conditions remain the norm throughout the industry.

Recent changes in global trade rules (the end of the import quota system) are once again speeding up the race to the bottom. The same companies pressuring suppliers to meet code-of-conduct standards are also demanding their products be made faster and cheaper, threatening to shift orders to factories in other countries. Conflicting pressures make suppliers hide abuses or subcontract to sewing workshops and homeworkers. The name of the game remains the same: more work for less pay.

Targeting the big-name brands is no longer a sufficient answer. Given how endemic sweatshop abuses are throughout the industry, selective shopping isn't the answer either.

We need to start by remembering that we are not just consumers: we are also citizens of countries and of the world. We can lobby our school boards, municipal governments and universities to adopt ethical purchasing policies that require apparel suppliers to disclose factory locations and evidence that there are serious efforts to improve conditions. We can write letters to companies when workers' rights are violated and in support of workers' efforts to organize. And we can put pressure on our governments to adopt policies and regulations that make companies accountable when they fail to address flagrant and persistent violations of workers' rights.

We should worry a little less about our shopping decisions, and a bit more about what we can do to support the young women and girls who labour behind the labels that adorn our clothes and sports shoes. ♦

Bob Jeffcott works with the Toronto-based Maquila Solidarity Network.

Chinese workers clothe the world: since the end of the quota-based Multi-Fibre Arrangement textile production has overwhelmingly shifted to China.

At the Maquila Solidarity Network, we get phone calls and emails almost every day of the week from people wanting to know where they can buy clothes that are Fairtrade-certified or sweatshop-free. Alternative retail outlets even contact us to ask whether we have a list of 'sweatfree' manufacturers. So, what are we to tell them? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers.

First, there's the cotton used to make the clothes. If you live in Canada, you may soon be able to buy a T-shirt at your local Cotton Ginny store that is both organic and Fairtrade Cotton certified. If you live in Britain, you can already purchase T-shirts and other apparel products bearing the Fairtrade Cotton label, not only through alternative fairtrade companies, but also at your local Marks & Spencer shop.

This is all to the good, isn't it? Growing organic cotton is better for the environment, and farmers are no longer exposed to dangerous chemicals. Fairtrade certified cotton goes a step further – a better price and a social dividend to small farmers in the global South.

But what happens when cotton goes downstream? What does the Fairtrade Cotton label tell us about the working lives of the young women and men who spin the cotton into yarn in China, or those who cut the cloth and sew the T-shirt in a Bangladeshi factory before it's shipped to my local Cotton Ginny store in Toronto?

Unfortunately, very little. The Fairtrade Cotton certification is about the conditions under which the cotton was grown, not how the T-shirt was sewn.

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