

Sweatshop Manufacturing: Engine of Poverty

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On a global scale, the reign of free market ideology has wrought deep changes. Manufacturing jobs in the developed nations are rapidly shrinking while abroad there has been a rise in sweatshop manufacturing, with conditions reminiscent of the worst of the 19th century. The effect has been to widen the gulf between the living conditions of the wealthy and those who labor for them.



Inequality has reached such an astounding level that it requires an act of willful blindness on the part of Western media not to notice it. Over half of the world's population subsists on less than \$2 a day, while the 200 richest individuals own more wealth than 41 percent of the world's population, or in other words, more than 2.6 billion people. Such an extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of the few cannot be construed as a failure of global capitalism. Indeed, it is a mark of its success, for this is what the system is designed to do. Nor can the mass immiseration on which the system rests be dismissed as an unfortunate mistake or an unintended byproduct of the process. Pillage is the very engine that drives the accumulation of riches.

It is abroad where the repercussions of triumphant capital are at their most troubling, especially in underdeveloped nations offering a pristine opportunity for unfettered exploitation. Even as the domestic workforce is being relentlessly driven into insecurity, the profits to be had from the exploitation of labor, markets and resources in the Third World are unsurpassed. Capitalism is a global system, and capital flows where it stands to reap the highest returns. It knows no boundaries.

Naked exploitation of labor is the hallmark of manufacturing jobs exported abroad. Giant corporations such as Wal-Mart constantly press suppliers to lower c



costs, causing plant managers to wring more production from already over-exploited workers. At a typical plant in Honduras, managers blame Wal-Mart's continual demands for cheaper clothing for the need to drive their workers so hard. Isabel Reyes labors at this plant for ten hours a day, where she is expected to sew sleeves onto 1,200 shirts during a single shift, an average of one sleeve every 15 seconds. "There is always an acceleration," she says. "The goals are always increasing, but the pay stays the same." After eleven years at the plant, her Carpal Tunnel Syndrome has worsened to the point where she cannot lift a pot or hold her baby without first taking anti-inflammatory pills. In compensation for her toil, she earns about \$35 a month.

U.S. corporations threaten to move production to countries with cheaper labor if demands for lower prices are not met. To meet that challenge, Honduran manufacturers slashed 20 percent of staff over a three-year period while maintaining the same level of production. Henry Fransen, director of the Honduran Apparel Manufacturers Association, remarked sardonically, "We're earning less and producing more, following the Wal-Mart philosophy." The Wal-Mart technique for purchasing fabrics is to approach a few plants in different countries and then pit them against each other. "We'll be putting our global muscle on them," gloated the head of the company's global procurement division. Even in Bangladesh, with its abysmal labor conditions and rock-bottom production costs, Wal-Mart asked factory owners to lower prices by up to 50 percent. With over 10,000 suppliers worldwide, Wal-Mart is a trendsetter in the apparel industry.

The harsh reality is that employment in a sweatshop is akin to imprisonment. The Alejandro Apparel plant in Honduras is representative of sweatshops throughout the Third World, with its barbed-wire fence, locked gates and armed security guards. Situated in the Choloma Free Zone, the firm is exempt from all taxes, import and export duties and tariffs. An average worker at Alejandro Apparel earns a wage of 86 cents per hour and sews 230 T-shirts in a ten and a half hour shift. Thus, a worker earns just four cents per shirt, less than one percent of its retail price. This plant supplies several American corporations, including Nike, Adidas and Hanes. In contrast to the insignificant sum a worker is paid for actually producing a shirt, Nike spends over two dollars to advertise it. Keeping up with harsh production quotas is difficult, and workers take just ten minutes for lunch. Management monitors bathroom use and any worker regarded as taking too long is ordered over a loudspeaker to return to his or her workstation. Employees are forbidden to speak to one another and supervisors routinely scream at and berate workers.

The situation is very much the same at Southeast Textiles, also located in the Choloma Free Zone, except that here before workers can use the restroom they must first ask permission and present a toilet pass stamped by a supervisor. Workers caught drinking water "too often" are called into the office and given a warning, because such a practice can lead to

the need for a restroom break. A second infraction brings swift punishment. At both plants, the relentless pace of production and unvarying routine produce repetitive strain injuries in a majority of workers.

Lydda Eli Gonzalez was one of 15 workers fired from Southeast Textiles for attempting to organize a union. Only because she had lost her job did she feel free to describe the working conditions there. Her job consisted of attaching sleeves to Sean John shirts. The quota set for a production line was to sew 2,288 shirts per shift; a goal intentionally set at an impossible level. The best that could be managed during a regular shift was half that amount, so workers were customarily required to work unpaid overtime in order to “compensate” management for the shortfall. “The supervisors stand over us shouting and cursing at us to go faster,” she said. “We are under constant pressure. They call us filthy names, like maldito, donkey, bitch, and worse things. You can’t answer the supervisors or they will fire you. It is very hot in the factory and you are sweating all day. There is also a lot of dust in the air. You breathe it in, and you go into the factory with black hair and come out with hair that is white or red or whatever the color of the shirts we are working on.” Once a worker succeeds in receiving permission to use the restroom

she must first suffer the indignity of being searched by a guard before being allowed to proceed. “You can go once in the morning and once in the afternoon,” Gonzalez explained. The work process at the plant is grueling. “You can’t move or stretch, or even look to the side. You just have to focus and work as fast as you can to complete the production goal, always under pressure. Because of this, and because the benches are just wood with no backs, by the end of the day your whole body aches, your back, arms, shoulders, everything, and one feels exhausted.”

At Niagra Textiles in Bangladesh, workers sew garments for Disney and Wal-Mart, earning the princely sum of 11 to 20 cents per hour. Helpers are paid even less than sewers, just 7 to 8 cents an hour. The pay is so abysmal that four workers must share a single shack, and one outhouse and water pump serves sixty people. Meals consist of nothing but rice, only occasionally flavored with a small amount of beans or potatoes. To manage even such a meager diet as this, workers must borrow money each week. The workweek is 14 hours a day, seven days a week. At best, employees are given one day off a month. On top of that schedule, employees are required to work a 19-hour shift once a week, from 8:00 AM until 3:00 AM the following morning. At the end of this extended shift, workers sleep on the floor at the factory. If a worker is caught talking in the factory, he is fined a day’s wages. “It is a bleak life. We have no hope,” confessed one worker. Another complained, “We have no life. We can’t afford to marry; we have no wife, no social life. We live just to work.”

It is the practice of Niagra Textiles to pay its workers two weeks late in order to earn extra interest from the bank. On one occasion, a small group of workers entered the manager’s office, asking when they would be paid. The outraged manager responded by assaulting one of the workers and screaming, “How dare you come into my office!” The manager made a cell phone call for assistance and then he and his assistant beat the workers. Thirty-some minutes later, five gang members arrived and thrashed the workers with sticks and stomped on those who had fallen to the ground. Police arrived during the melee, and gang members helpfully pointed out the workers they were to arrest. Eight employees were taken to jail, where they remained for two weeks before being released on bail and facing charges. Every worker who had inquired about pay was dismissed, including those who had eluded arrest.

At the Western Dresses factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Robina Akther usually worked from

7:45 in the morning until 10:00 or 11:00 PM, and seven or eight nights a month she was ordered to work until 3:00 AM. "The factory never shuts down," she reported. "In the first six months I did not have a single day off." In a typical year, Akther would get less than ten days off. "My job was to sew the flaps on the back pockets of these pants. I had to sew 120 pieces an hour. It was

difficult to reach. If you made any mistakes or fell behind on your goal, they beat you. They slapped you and lashed you hard on the face with the pants. This happens very often. They hit you hard." Workers at the factory are not permitted to talk. "If the supervisors even see you move your lips or make a gesture to a friend, they cut your overtime pay as punishment. We work sitting on hard wooden stools with no backs or arm rests. But if you even stand up to stretch, they cut your overtime pay."

At a factory in Thailand producing clothing for Reebok, Adidas and Levi's, amphetamines were added to the large drink containers during busy production periods, enabling employees to work up to 48 hours straight. The practice was so commonplace that many workers became addicted to the drugs and sought them on the black market. Discipline was harsh, and anyone perceived to be working too slowly could expect to be grabbed and shouted at. The fine for a worker

caught yawning was more than \$11, and in one case, a worker was docked more than \$46 for bringing a lemon to work to help her stay awake. The owner often hectored the workers over a loudspeaker, telling them that anyone attempting to organize a union could "say goodbye to your parents." Since six thuggish bodyguards always accompanied the owner and security guards monitored workers, the threat was taken seriously. Then one day without any warning the owner disappeared, having absconded with the workers' back wages.

Conditions are no better at sweatshops operating in China, as factory owners there routinely ignore legal protections for workers, and little or no attempt is made to enforce such laws. At Kin Ki Industrial on the outskirts of Shenzhen, the Etch-a-Sketch toy is manufactured. Workers there are paid 24 cents an hour, little more than two-thirds of the legal minimum wage. The workweek consists of 12-hour shifts, seven days a week, exceeding the legal permissible limit on working

hours. At Foreway Industrial in Dongguan, toys for American major league sports, Wal-Mart, Disney and Hasbro are produced. The workweek is seven days long. Workers receive one day off every other month and about half of the national holidays. During peak production periods, employees work from 8:00 AM until 2:00 to 4:30 AM. For their efforts, they are paid an average of 16 and a half cents an hour. Wages are frequently paid late, and in one instance when desperate workers organized a strike over late pay, all fifty activists were fired. Workers who wish to quit automatically forfeit one and a half month's back wages.

At Daxu Cosmetics in Anshan, workers painstakingly assemble false eyelashes by hand. It is tedious and exhausting work that strains the eyes. The starting wage at Daxu is \$24 a month, from which \$13 is deducted for overcrowded and inadequate lodging. Even during off-hours, workers are locked inside the facility, although they are occasionally permitted to spend time on the grounds of the adjoining mental hospital. Workers are allowed only one shower per week, and the menu for every meal never varies – cabbage and potato porridge. If an employee wants to quit, she must first pay the owner a penalty fee of \$58, an impossible sum to save. One woman who in her attempt to escape through a third story

window fell and broke both legs and displaced vertebrae, characterized the plant as follows: "What they called a company was really a prison."

Such stories are legion, and reveal the mean-spirited heart of the all-consuming drive for profit by global capitalism far more accurately than the gleaming images of affluence that are beamed into our living rooms on the television. We are never shown the downtrodden millions: 852 million undernourished people, including 9 million in industrialized countries. Despite a sharp reduction of hunger in China, the global number of hungry has increased in recent years, a trend that has been particularly pronounced in underdeveloped nations and the republics of the former Soviet Union which are now enjoying the fruits of the free market. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization asks, "If we already know the basic parameters of what needs to be done, why have we allowed hundreds of millions of people to go hungry in a world that produces more than enough food for every woman, man and child? Bluntly stated, the problem is not so much a lack of food as a lack of political will." There is indeed enough food in the world to sustain every person. The problem of hunger is not one of supply but of an economic system based on inequality and a gross concentration of wealth in the hands of the few.

As long as glorification of the free market holds sway, the political will for addressing this urgent problem will never materialize. The lure of profit will trump people's needs every time. This is "the system that works." And so it does – for those at the top. It is often said that capitalism is the most efficient system for producing wealth. It would be more accurate to say that what the system accomplishes is to produce a concentration of wealth. Capitalism does not generate wealth from the thin air. It seizes it. The price for this concentration of wealth in the hands of the few is poverty and misery on an extraordinary scale, yet we rarely if ever hear the cries of those who are trampled underfoot in the stampede for riches.

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<http://www.amazon.com/Strange-Liberators-Militarism-Mayhem-Pursuit/dp/1595265708>

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