

Faithful Purchasing and the Global Sweatshop Economy

Reading the Signs of the Times

Every time we purchase an item produced, assembled or laundered in a sweatshop, we become accomplices to the exploitation of employees working under oppressive conditions. Most of us do this daily, often without even knowing it!

In manufacturing plants around the world and in Canada and the United States, workers are employed in harsh, demeaning, and dangerous conditions: 16-hour days, slavery and bonded labor, sexual harassment and rape, dangerous equipment and toxic chemicals, child labor, poverty wages, violations of basic labor laws, threats to and even the murder of workers who seek to form a union, and all sorts of degrading and humiliating treatment.

In our globalized economy, the products we buy and their component parts originate from around the globe. Giant retail corporations search worldwide for manufacturing firms that will produce the products they desire at the lowest possible cost. Some have called this the “race to the bottom” as multinationals leap from one low-wage country to another, seeking the lowest cost producers. For many items such as food, clothes, footwear, and electronics, the “bottom” where it is produced most cheaply is a low-wage country such as China, Cambodia or Bangladesh. The factories producing these products that are usually destined to be sold in other countries like the United States and Canada are known as sweatshops due to their poor treatment of workers.

A sweatshop is a plant or facility with a very difficult or even dangerous working environment. Typically, workers have few rights or means by which they can address their situation. Sweatshop workers are often forced to work long hours for little or even no pay despite laws mandating overtime pay and a minimum wage. Children may be employed in violation of child labor laws. Workers may be exposed to harmful materials, hazardous situations, or extreme temperatures. They may suffer physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from employers. Though often associated with Third World countries in the global South, sweatshops can exist in any country and are also commonly found in the United States, Canada and other major industrialized countries. In fact, investigations by the U.S. Department of Labor have found that 100 percent of all poultry processing plants in the United States violate basic labor laws, as do 60 percent of nursing homes, and over 50 percent of Los Angeles, California, garment factories. These workplaces are sweatshops.

Fortunately, we can help change this reality.

This video introduces the State and Local Government Sweatfree Consortium (www.sweatfree.org/sweatfreeconsortium), a bold initiative spearheaded by the U.S.-based SweatFree Communities (www.sweatfree.org). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recently endorsed the Sweatfree Consortium at their 2008 General Assembly and other denominations in the United States and Canada also work to end sweatshops. Many faith groups encourage

congregations and individuals to purchase non-sweatshop, green (ecologically-sound) products as much as possible. As you watch the video, think about how you and your faith community could get involved through changes in personal and institutional purchasing and support for the consortium or similar efforts.

View the video “Sweatfree Communities: Make Your Community Sweatfree”

(9:45 minutes) <http://vidego.multicastmedia.com/player.php?v=u0wm9w50>

Discussion questions:

1. Are there rights that every worker should have? What are they?
2. What responsibilities do large, multinational companies have regarding their suppliers? What oversight should multinational firms provide for the workers employed by their suppliers?
3. Should poor workers in poor countries be appreciative of any job they can get? Should these workers have a right to a decent wage, benefits, and fair treatment?
4. Should poor workers in the United States and Canada be appreciative of any job they can get? Should these workers have a right to a decent wage, benefits, and fair treatment?
5. What responsibility or obligation does a consumer have if the product she buys and uses is made under sweatshop conditions?

Confessing Our Faith

Matthew 22:15–22 (NRSV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Reflection

The Jews of Jesus' day lived in the Roman Empire under the domination of the Roman military, Roman political system (rule by a small elite that evolved into a dictatorship), and Roman emperor (Caesar). The Roman elites used the Jews—and other conquered peoples—for their own purposes. They could (and did) command the Jews to pay money to them (taxes), give them portions of their agricultural products, or work for little or no pay in the service of the Empire's building projects. When the Jews resisted, they were crucified and left hanging in very visible locations as a vivid sign of the Empire's power. Jews in Israel would have been very familiar with these “signs” of the Roman Empire and its power over the Israelites.

One sign of the Empire was the centurions, the Roman soldiers who embodied its threatening, absolute power. Their presence as the occupying army in Israel made them a target for resentment and disdain. Their bright metal helmets and breastplates were a menacing reminder of Empire.

Another sign of the Empire was Jewish tax collectors. They were regarded as traitors to Israel because of their cooperation in collecting the very taxes that kept Israelites impoverished and in a servile position to the Roman Empire. They made their livings by extorting whatever extra money they were capable of getting.

Herodians—including their most recognized member, Herod the Great—were a group of Jews who collaborated in the domination of Israel by Rome. They served the Empire’s interests, not the interests of their own people, and Rome rewarded them for this. But many Jews regarded them as traitors. They recognized Jesus as someone who opposed the Roman Empire and so they tried to undermine him (also see Mark 3:6).

Roman coins, another sign of the Empire, featured the image of Caesar and proclaimed him a god. This was a double violation of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3); “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (v. 4).

Colonized territories like Israel were used as a source of tax revenue, raw materials, and specialized goods to serve the Roman Empire. The Jews were forced to provide these things to the Romans, even when it meant they were left with inadequate resources for themselves. The dominated people could also be used as forced laborers to build the things the Empire wanted such as fortresses, new cities or ports.

In the Roman Empire coins were visible signs of Rome’s domination. Centurions, Herodians, and tax collectors all served the Empire including its need to keep subjugated people under control and provide money and goods to the Roman rulers.

Today we seldom use the term *empire*. However, in some countries small factions hold great power over other residents. In other cases nations dominate entire other nations. The reasons for the domination are similar to those in the days of the Roman Empire: the desire by the elites to extract wealth and goods from the dominated peoples. And just like in Jesus’ day, dominated people wonder how to resist. The signs of Empire are very apparent to oppressed people. They may not be so obvious to those who are not oppressed.

Bible study questions

1. Why do you think there was any question about the rightness of paying taxes
2. What would be the everyday reminders to Jesus’ people that they were living under the Roman Empire?
3. Can you imagine that Jesus’ words about the coin might have been said in a cleverly rebellious way?
4. Who would be the equivalent of the centurions in our world (within the United States, Canada or other countries)? What is the role of modern-day centurions?
5. Consider the Herodians of Jesus’ day. Can you think of examples of similar factions in today’s global politics?

6. There were many symbols of the Roman Empire (images, flags, pictures on coins, etc.). What are today's symbols of empire? (Hint: Think about military symbols, national flags, corporate logos, ubiquitous trademarks, advertising songs, and cultural images.)
7. Today how do some nations extract money, raw materials, or labor from other nations? (Hint: Think about resource extraction, cheap labor, and large-scale agriculture.) How does this happen within a country?
8. Look at the tag on one of the garments you are wearing. Where was it made? If Jesus held up currency during a rally in that country today, what kind of money would it be? What would Jesus say?

Adapted from Challenging Empire: A Call to Community, Mandate: The United Church of Canada's Mission Magazine, May 2007

Covenanting for Justice

In the absence of a legal and/or regulatory framework to effectively eliminate abusive sweatshop conditions, consumers have turned to other means: buying sweat-free and fairly traded products.

Avoid buying products made in sweatshops. Roughly 2 million apparel workers located in 150 nations make products for American and Canadian retailers. Some 80 percent of these are working in sweatshops under conditions that systematically violate international or local labor laws. Nearly all retail stores carry goods made in sweatshops. Most apparel is made in a sweatshop. Almost the only way to avoid purchasing sweatshop products is to purchase union-made clothes or buy through manufacturers certified to be sweat-free. Sweat Free Communities offers a sweat-free Shopping Guide (www.sweatfree.org/shopping). In the United States Coop America's National Green Pages (<http://www.coopamerica.org/pubs/greenpages/>) contain a huge listing of companies selling sweat-free, union-made, and environmentally-friendly items. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) sells sweat-free T-shirts (www.pcusa.org/sweatfree) made by a women's sewing cooperative in Nicaragua. In Canada the Maquila Solidarity Network (en.maquilasolidarity.org) documents sweatshop abuses and advocates for buying sweat-free products.

Buy fairly traded goods. Fair trade is an equitable exchange between the people who make products and the people who buy them. It empowers low-income and marginalized farmers and artisans around the world. It eliminates many of the "middle men" and directly pays artisans, farmers, democratically run cooperatives, and other producers a living wage for their products, appropriate for their country and location. It encourages producers to engage in environmentally-sustainable practices, respects cultural identity, often provides much-needed credit, and promotes healthy, safe, and humane working conditions.

In the United States, the Interfaith Program (www.equalexchange.com/interfaith-program) established by Equal Exchange (www.equalexchange.com) has "Coffee Projects" (partnerships between Equal Exchange and many denominations and faith bodies) that facilitate the use of fairly traded coffee, tea, chocolate, and other products by congregations and people of faith. There are many other companies selling fairly traded coffee also. In Canada and the United States, Transfair (transfair.ca/en/node & www.transfairusa.org) is a certification and public

education organization promoting Fair Trade Certified products to improve the livelihood of developing world farmers and workers. Ten Thousand Villages (www.tenthousandvillages.com), with roots in the Mennonite community, has outlets in Canada and the United States and sells a wide variety of fairly traded products. Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) is an advocacy and educational group that also sells fair trade goods.

Confessing Our Faith

Excerpted from the Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth

We believe that God calls us to stand with those who are victims of injustice. We know what the Lord requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk in God's way (Micah 6:8). We are called to stand against any form of injustice in the economy and the destruction of the environment, "so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Therefore we reject any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice that destroys right relations—gender, race, class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology that affirms that human interests dominate nature.

We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ, who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness (John 10:10). Jesus brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind (Luke 4:18); he supports and protects the downtrodden, the stranger, the orphans and the widows.

Therefore we reject any church practice or teaching that excludes the poor and care for creation, in its mission; giving comfort to those who come to "steal, kill and destroy" (John 10:10) rather than following the "Good Shepherd" who has come for life for all (John 10:11).

By confessing our faith together we covenant in obedience to God's will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships. This binds us together to work for justice in the economy and the Earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings.

Closing Litany

Since our mothers and fathers cried out, since you heard their cries and noticed, since we left the brick production of Egypt, since you foiled the production schedules of Pharaoh,
we have known your name,
we have sensed your passion,
we have treasured your vision of justice.

And now we turn to you again, you whose precious name we know.

We turn to you because there are
still impossible production schedules,
still exploitative systems,
still cries of pain at injustice,
still cheap labor that yields misery.

We turn to you in impatience and exasperation, wondering, "How long?"
Before you answer our pleading question, hear our petition.

Since you are not a labor boss and do not set wages, we bid you: Stir up those who can change things:

do your stirring in the jaded halls of government;
do your stirring in the cynical offices of the corporations;
do your stirring amid the voting public too anxious to care;
do your stirring in the church that thinks too much about purity and not enough about wages.

Move, as you moved in ancient Egyptian days; move the waters and the flocks and the herds toward new
statutes and regulations, new equity and health care, new dignity that is not given on the cheap.

We have known now long since,
that you reject cheap grace;
We now know as well,
that you reject cheap labor.

You God of justice and dignity and equity,...
keep the promises you bodied in Jesus,
that the poor may be first-class members of society;
that the needy may have good care and respect;
that the poor Earth may rejoice in well-being;
that we may all come to Sabbath rest together,
the owner and the worker,
the leisure class and the labor class,
all at rest in dignity and justice,
not on the cheap, but
in good measure,
pressed down,
running over . . . forgiven (Luke 6:37–38). Amen.

—by Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for the New Social Awakening*

Additional Resources

There are many sources for additional information on sweatshops in the United States, Canada and around the globe.

- The International Labor Rights Forum (www.laborrights.org) filed a lawsuit on behalf of workers in China, Nicaragua, Swaziland, Indonesia, and Bangladesh against Wal-Mart. They charged the company with knowingly developing purchasing policies that the manufacturers they contract could not possibly meet while also following the Wal-Mart code of conduct.
- North American labor unions have helped support the anti-sweatshop movement out of concern both for the welfare of people in the developing world and for workers in the North who have lost or are at risk of losing jobs in the global race to the bottom.
- The National Labor Committee (www.nlcnet.org/index.php) is involved in many struggles around the world. NLC's video about sweatshops, "Hidden Face of Globalization," is excellent. (9:48 minutes) www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Bhodyt4fmU&feature=related

In Canada groups like the Maquila Solidarity Network (en.maquilasolidarity.org) work in solidarity with women's and labor rights organizations in Mexico, Central America and Asia, promoting respect for workers' rights through corporate engagement, coalition building, and policy advocacy.

Groups active in the United States:

- **SweatFree Communities** (www.sweatfree.org) in the United States shares resources and information to assist campaigns to convince school districts, cities, states, and other institutional purchasers to adopt "sweatfree" purchasing policies and stop tax dollars from subsidizing sweatshops and abusive child labor. SFC is building a national sweatfree movement with the unity and political strength to generate significant market demand for products that are made in humane conditions by workers who earn living wages.
- **United Students Against Sweatshops** (www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org) is active on college campuses and established the **Worker Rights Consortium** (www.workersrights.org) to conduct investigations of working conditions in factories around the globe.