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Mean Jeans - A Clean Clothes Publication

Sunday, 01 November 1998 14:33

Mean jeans



We bet you have at least one pair of jeans in your closet. Almost everybody does.

Jeans are blue, made of denim, have pockets. They are all more or less alike, you could say. Still, for many people the brand name is the important thing. You wouldn't want to be seen in a brandless pair from the market when Chipie or G-Star is the fashionable thing. Can one still wear Levi's? Or in your circle does it have to be Calvin Klein or some other designer brand of jeans? Or perhaps you don't care about labels and you buy jeans that are on sale, whatever the name?

Whatever you choose, there are more similarities between all these different pairs of jeans than you might think. This has to do with the way they are produced. Do you know how your jeans were made? And where? And by whom? Read all about it in this 'Jeans file'.

My name is Amanda, I am 20 years old. I work in a garment factory in Jakarta, Indonesia. I sew Levi's jeans. Though I have to work 75 hours a week, I am making less than minimum wage. Even the minimum wage would not be enough to live on. I can barely buy food with what I make. We cannot refuse to do overtime, they fire you. One time we went on strike to demand better wages and a transportation and food allowance. The management refused to give in to our demands and the people who were suspected to have organized the strike were fired.

Amanda's story is not unusual. Within the global garment industry, it is not uncommon to find female workers working long hours for low pay. Many employers prefer women because they believe that they complain less and also because they can get away with paying them less, due to the sexual stereotypes in many countries. Some factories might pay the local minimum wage, but this isn't the same as a living wage--or in other words, a wage that you can actually live off. But many garment factories don't even pay the minimum wage. Another important aspect of the bad working conditions found in the factories where jeans are made has to do with hours. Many garment workers put in much more than the internationally-recognized standard workweek of 48 hours. Many people who stitch the jeans we wear also are forced to work overtime, sometimes working weeks without even a day off. Worst of all, garment workers are regularly denied the right to organize. In some cases armed guards and repressive management techniques (yelling, hitting, sexual intimidation) are used to stop workers from getting together to discuss improving their workplace. Child labour and unhealthy conditions (for example, bad air, bad water and little access to toilets) are other problems that are regularly revealed by researchers who investigate the situation in the garment industry.

nothing directly for us at this moment, but we're supporting several human rights defenders in Thailand and Malaysia

Green jeans?

Environmental issues related to jeans mainly have to do with the stuff that they're made of: cotton. Cotton fields take up more than 5% of the world's land surface (that's 34 million hectares). This cash crop places a high demand on water. This has consequences for food production especially in poorer countries with insufficient land and water for such farming. Importantly, huge quantities of pesticides (25% of pesticides used worldwide) are used in growing cotton. Pesticides, some banned in the West on safety grounds, are exported for use in cotton production in developing countries. For example, pesticides with organophosphates are particularly harmful and can seriously damage workers' health. The excessive and/or unsafe use of these pesticides in cotton production alone results in an estimated 1 million acute pesticide poisonings each year. Don't forget the dying, washing and bleaching involved in making jeans which also involves lots of chemicals.

The organic cotton industry is at an early stage of development (just 0.08% of cotton grown worldwide is organic) and the switch to organic production isn't easy. It takes money to invest in new systems and also a willingness to relearn old techniques. Most jeans producers and retailers lack knowledge and a commitment toward environmentally friendly production. Levi Strauss has an environmental policy, but it doesn't have any fixed targets and dates for improvements! Hemp jeans are an alternative to cotton jeans since hemp is a much stronger plant, that can easily be grown without the use of lots of pesticides.

Levi's has a factory in Poland. Irma and Olga are both in their early twenties, working as seamstresses in this factory. There is no trade union here, only a workers' committee. Each section of the factory chooses a representative. They meet from time to time, always together with the management. In 1997 the workers wanted to form a trade union, but the manager said that "here at Levi Strauss we don't have any need for trade unions and there will not be any trade union". Irma says: "a union would be useful to address problems the management neglects and to be able to do things when people are fired". Both women earn Zł 1000 per month, this is not enough to live on. Olga: "We work 40 hours a week and there is not much overtime. Sometimes on Saturdays. I would like to work more in order to earn more, but there is not enough work". Their biggest problem is the work pressure. Management sets quota: you have to sew so and so many jeans a day. Irma says "In other factories they earn more or less the same as us. But we have such high quotas. And if you don't make them, you are in trouble. People get fired for that".

There's nothing new about blue jeans

Jeans are made out of denim, a fabric probably named after the Frenchman Serge de Nîmes, who made the material during the 17th century. In those days pants made out of denim were known as "jean" after the sailors of Genoa, Italy, who wore them. Today you can find people wearing jeans down gold mines in South Africa, up the steep mountains of the Peruvian Andes, in the forest of the Congo or on the fashion catwalks of New York and Milan.

The hype surrounding jeans started when they became linked with the images of Hollywood movie stars and Western pop idols. Jeans manufacturers created even more interest in their brands, with massive advertising campaigns. Companies like the Gap, for example, hired famous photographers like Annie Leibovitz and Herb Ritts, to shoot their ads, which featured celebrities like Sharon Stone, Demi Moore, and Lenny Kravitz. Jeans companies began to spend millions on projecting just the right image to attract customers of all ages and lifestyles.

World Wide Web of Work

In many ways--through high tech communications and travel options --large distances are shrinking. But investment and business are also important ways that once distant cultures are coming into contact, and the clothing industry is a good example. Producers of jeans roam around the world looking for the best locations to set up production sites. Though some jeans are still stitched in Europe, most production has moved to countries where wages are lower and conditions more favourable for the big companies. The jeans in your closet might be produced in China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Poland, Romania or France. Often the factories are not owned by the jeans companies. They only place orders there. The factories compete fiercely with one another to get these orders. Therefore, they sometimes accept orders for a very low price, which doesn't even enable them to make a profit. To survive, they subcontract the order to another factory--usually small workshops--for an even lower price. This small workshop can subcontract again, for example to homeworkers--for an even lower price. Such a 'subcontracting chain' can even stretch across borders into even more countries. The jeans company that placed the order might not even be aware of who actually makes their jeans.

The VF Corporation is the parent company of brands like Lee and Wrangler. In 1995 a Lee factory in Leper, Belgium, closed its doors. Though the factory was still profitable, it would be even more profitable elsewhere because of lower wages. The 480 workers were laid off, some after 22 years of working in this (unionized) factory. In 1997 the manager of a Polish VF Corporation factory declared he would not allow a union. "There is a work council, they meet once a month with the management. The objectives of the factory are discussed. The work council works with volunteers, people are asked to do it. There are no elections because it is not an official body".

JOB DESCRIPTION

Seeking young women willing to work long hours, for low pay, without protective gear, seven days a week, sometimes 24 hours in a row. Ability to deal with stress a plus. Union activists need not apply.

Job: Sewing jeans and other clothes for Pepe, Guess, Wrangler, Tommy, the Gap and Burton. You and your 700 colleagues will sew 500,000 pieces a month for customers in the UK, Ireland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United States.

Equipment: Sewing machines and stools.

Place of work: Hong Kong-owned factory in Mauritius. View of busy industrial estate from windows that don't open.

Hours: Seven days a week

Housing: Nearby or inside the factory

Benefits: A multicultural experience: You'll meet other workers, some who have traveled all the way from China!

Contact us Now

Make a fashion statement

But workers aren't just accepting this situation. There are many examples around the world of workers in the garment industry organizing to demand their rights, forming unions or other sorts of workers associations.

And the people who buy jeans also refuse to accept that their clothes have to be produced in these dreadful circumstances. Sometimes when shoppers learn about the human rights violations that take place within the clothing industry, they also organize.

Activists of all sorts (from solidarity groups, consumer groups, universities and trade unions, for example) have come together across Europe within the Clean Clothes Campaign network and drafted their own set of guidelines for what acceptable working conditions are in the garment industry. This Code of Conduct, as such lists of labour standards have come to be known, includes standards developed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that deal with wages, hours, child labour, the right to form a trade union and other important items. The Clean Clothes campaigners demand that clothing manufacturers recognize these standards and also demand that an independent system is used to check that these standards are really being followed in the workplace (this is called independent monitoring).

In the meantime, some jeans companies (like Levi Strauss for example) have made their own codes of conduct. That's OK if they include all the important ILO labour standards and they really enforce them in the workplace. Unfortunately, not all companies are serious about their codes of conduct. Some don't include crucial labour rights, such as the right to form a trade union and the right to collective bargaining. And many don't have a good system in place to really implement these codes. So in the end, the code is just a list of nice ideas on a piece of paper. Researchers have also found that around the world in many factories where people make clothes for companies that have these nice codes of conduct, the workers don't even know that they exist.

Why do the companies even bother, you might ask. Well, executives in the clothing industry have found that people don't want to buy clothes that were made by child labour, or by people paid almost nothing, or by people forced to work seven days a week, for example. So, as a result of their research into what consumers prefer, a "corporate responsibility" movement developed. This means that jeans companies were thinking about to emphasize in their marketing campaigns, more and more often they included a message of concern regarding social conditions in the workplace. Unfortunately, in some cases the codes of conduct have been a product of this corporate responsibility marketing movement. Sometimes a corporate commitment to improving working conditions only goes as far as their public relations department. Of course when a company develops a good code of conduct it can be a step in the right direction, toward better working conditions. But it's not enough. The code has to be implemented and it has to be continuously followed-upon. That's real social responsibility.

A Question about Cost

A question often asked is, won't these 'clean clothes' be terribly expensive? But if we look at the following price example, we'll see that the actual expense for wages is only a very small part of the price one pays for a pair of jeans. Although the share for wages in the total price make-up varies, it's usually never higher than 5%.



The Trends Just Keep Coming

Most retailers buy both "basic" and "fashion" jeans. For jeans, fashion changes are subtle but crucial. New materials are also important. At the moment jeans are made of raw denim or "one-wash" jeans. Neutral colours are in--navy, black, espresso, khaki, off-white and white. The labels stitched on the back pockets are smaller. Forms

are simple, the overall look is modest, clean, classy, and comfortable.

Many jeans producers are re-introducing "worker" jeans in all kinds of styles, with a wider fit than the straight five pocket jeans. Right now you hear phrases like "updated traditionals" or "authenticity" to describe jeans! They're also introducing other "retro" versions from the '60s, the '70s. You get the idea. At the same time companies making jeans are creating new products for aging Baby Boomers. Levi Strauss for example came out with Dockers.

Most Dutch students when asked for their favourite brand of clothing, mentioned a jeans brand. While 38.2% did not have a favourite, 17.9% said Levi's. G-star was favourite with 6.2% of students and 6.0% preferred Diesel. H&M followed with 4.6%.

(source: Nieuwe Revu 2-9-98)

What to do?

By now you probably have a better idea of where, by whom and at what cost your jeans are made. As you can see, labour conditions in the international jeans industry are among the worst. But we're not sharing this information with you to get you depressed. It's not hopeless, though it seems that at the moment none of the major jeans manufacturers offer real socially responsible jeans. You really do have to search hard to find truly clean clothes.

Purchasing Power

As a consumer each individual has some power. You should use it as constructively as you can, opting for relatively good rather than absolutely bad products. This means thinking differently and redefining the message transmitted by the label stitched onto the back of your jeans. Once you know about the labour behind that label, it's up to you to choose accordingly. Don't let your backside be a billboard for a set of standards you don't believe in.

Make Noise

Apart from consuming as responsibly as possible, there are other things to do. People belonging to labour unions, women's organisations, consumers organisations, and fair trade shops all over the world are busy with awareness raising activities, helping to educate consumers about the way their clothes are produced, and also working with organisations of garment workers, sweatshop workers, homeworkers and migrant workers to educate and organize to demand an end to bad working conditions.

This is a publication of the Clean Clothes Campaign, a coalition of consumer organisations, trade unions, researchers, solidarity groups, worldshops and other activists, who try to improve working conditions in the garment industry worldwide. The CCC is active throughout Europe, with campaigns in The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy and Austria. For more information on the CCC, contact us!