



# “Gapatistas” Win a Victory

■ Jon Pattee

The generic Central American shopping mall is an air-conditioned ark of plate glass and aluminum, tightly sealed against the city’s boiling sea of poverty. Inside, scrubbed and suspicious cafeteria employees serve up expensive meals on orange trays. My lunch companion today is a young labor rights activist, in a country where military death squads run by big business have murdered thousands of union members. Currently a student of labor law, he has risked life and limb for the cause of international solidarity.

It is the rule in this region of the world—much more so than in the U.S.—that to take on the boss is to play with your life. *A couple years ago, he says, as I left work downtown, a truck pulled up behind me. Three guys in civilian clothes jumped out, forced me into my car, and made me to crouch down on my hands and knees. They were hitting me with their pistols and swearing at me. I was swearing back at them, to provoke them. I wanted them to kill me right there, not take me some place for torture.* He has also witnessed how U.S. labor is in the cross hairs. Incredulously, he describes being clubbed by the Los Angeles police at a Justice for Janitors rally. *I couldn’t believe it—I didn’t know the police were allowed to do that in the United States!* he exclaims.

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■ Jon Pattee was on the staff of the Midwest Center for Labor Research. He and other activists of the Nicaragua Solidarity Committee worked on the Gap campaign coordinated by Chicago’s Jobs with Justice.

Like other labor activists throughout the Americas, he is hoping that U.S. unions will invest more in strategic international campaigns. This, to him, is the key to saving lives, jobs, and living standards. His question is urgent: *How are we going to link workers' struggles from country to country?*

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*How is the U.S. labor movement going to create real international solidarity?*

Nine months later, as Chicago's frigid wind whips sleet across our informational picket line, my Central American friend is a continent away. Beneath the trendy facade of a Gap clothing store, we are passing out leaflets condemning the retailer's purchases of shirts from a union-busting factory in El Salvador called Mandarin. We've been out in this damp chill for over two hours, but with numbed hands, we are trying to answer his question, one leaflet at a time. International solidarity has brought together, among others, members of the Union of Needletrade, Industrial, Textile Employees (UNITE!), Women for Economic Justice, the Nicaragua Solidarity Committee, SEIU, IATSE, and the Illinois Nurses Association.

Today's picket marks several months of such actions at different Gaps around Chicago. Coordinated locally by Jobs with Justice, the actions were called in response to the National Labor Committee's (NLC) campaign against sweatshops in general, and the Mandarin factory in particular. We're not just a dot on the map, though. The NLC, a worker and human rights advocacy group focusing on labor issues in Latin America, has mobilized many allies. From Tennessee to California, the Gap is facing rallies, pickets, letter-writing, and call-in campaigns by labor, community, and religious groups.

Around Chicago, we picketers have taken to calling ourselves the "Gapatistas." At our particular line, the scene is familiar: a few shoppers, heads lowered like bulls, charge past us into the Gap's flannel-and-blue jeans Nirvana. Most, however, grab a leaflet. Many stop to ask questions. Sometimes, unasked, they take their business to a different clothing store. Other times, they go inside the Gap and ask the increasingly sour-faced store managers questions like: *You're charging \$20 for a shirt that you paid some teenage girl sixteen cents to sew? What's up with that?*

The managers stick their heads out the door to alternately shout at us and sweet-talk us. They're exasperated that the Gap is being singled out for a commonplace vice among clothing retailers: contracting out manufacturing orders to one of thousands of brutally-run factories, "maquilas," in developing nations. Most *maquilas*, Mandarin included, hire very young women at starvation wages. Few of these women have



their stories told abroad. Though we don't know it as we pass leaflets on this freezing December day, the Gap campaign is headed for several significant triumphs in the months to come.

### **HOW IT ALL STARTED: EL SALVADOR**

According to the National Labor Committee, the Gap campaign began with the workers of El Mandarin, a Taiwanese-owned maquila. Located in a "free trade zone," which was built with a low-interest loan from the Bush administration, Mandarin produces clothing for such U.S. companies as J.C. Penney, Eddie Bauer, Liz Claiborne, J. Crew, and the Gap. At the time of the NLC's first contact with the workers, over one hundred young women between the ages of fourteen and seventeen were sewing goods for the Gap's four billion dollar a year retail business. Conditions at the factory were horrific. According to Tutela Legal, the Catholic Archdiocese human rights office in El Salvador:

- If workers were accused of poor work, Mandarin supervisors would "hit the women on the head with their fists."
- Pregnant workers were the object of "verbal and physical maltreatment."
- Workers were forced to work overtime, excluding even the possibility of obtaining an education.
- Mandarin paid its workers "just enough to allow the women to survive, to stay alive."

El Salvador's Human Rights Ombuds Office confirmed these and other charges and told NLC investigators that labor rights violations at Mandarin ran the gamut of "physical abuse, firings, sexual harassment, and being denied access to health care."

Such conditions were familiar to the New York-based NLC, which for several years had been doing basic worker education in Honduras and El Salvador. NLC staff had been trying to make workers aware not only of their rights, but also of their own abilities to organize and do research. "We're talking about really basic, really important stuff these folks hadn't been made aware of, like how to collect and analyze garment labels to see who they were working for and where the products were going," says NLC Executive Director Charles Kernaghan.

What made Mandarin different from the many other maquilas known to the NLC was that in the face of great intimidation, in a large factory in a free trade zone, the workers successfully organized a union. The Sindicato de Empresa Trabajadores Mandarin Internacional (SETMI) petitioned Mandarin for recognition in February of 1995. When the company refused to recognize SETMI and locked out the workers, the NLC wrote a letter to the Salvadoran Ministry of Labor. The ministry proved unresponsive to that and other attempts to persuade it to enforce the Salvadoran labor code.

The NLC's involvement with SETMI grew as Mandarin's treatment of the workers became more aggressive. From February through May, 1995, the company made and broke several agreements to take back the locked-out workers. Two decisive and brutal attempts to crush the union followed, both documented by the Salvadoran Human Rights Ombuds Office. In May, Mandarin contracted armed thugs to harass, intimidate, and beat the SETMI women. In June, Mandarin fired more than 300 union members. According to the Ombuds Office, "the entire union ended up outside and fired."

NLC investigators worked with the women of SETMI to limit these attacks "on the ground" in El Salvador, and would do so throughout the Gap campaign. Still, by the end of the spring, according to Kernaghan, "it was clear that the only way these women were going to win this fight was to take it straight to the people who line Mandarin's pockets—the U.S. clothing companies."

The NLC could not simultaneously hold accountable several enormous multinationals such as J.C. Penney, Eddie Bauer, Liz Claiborne, J. Crew, and the Gap, all of whom were Mandarin contractors. Therefore, they made the decision to target one of these companies and pressure them to push for better working conditions at Mandarin. According to Frank Klein, Political Action and Education Director for the Mid-

west Region of UNITE!, “The garment manufacturers have a tremendous amount of power in these situations. They can pretty much call a lot of the shots in the factories they contract to.”

A significant block of purchases from Mandarin (20% of the factory’s overall shirt production, according to an August 9, 1995 *Los Angeles Times* article) helped put the Gap at the head of the list of possible corporate targets. More importantly, though, the Gap’s purchases flew in the face of a well-tailored public image. As Kernaghan would explain in a National Public Radio interview on December 1, 1995, “the Gap promotes itself as a company that respects women’s rights and respects the rights of children and respects the environment and respects education. Well, that reputation has to come in line with reality now.”

On this basis, the Gap was chosen as the campaign’s target. The basic demands were simple. The Gap needed to:

- Demand fair treatment of the Mandarin workers.
- Push Mandarin to accept the union and hire back the fired workers.
- Stay in El Salvador to work out the problems rather than cut and run to another country.

The Gap initially resisted all efforts to modify their relationship with Mandarin, even going as far as to claim that an in-house investigation could find no evidence of NLC charges. To kick off the campaign to bring the Gap to the negotiating table, the NLC rolled out a secret weapon: three teenage women.

### **ON THE ROAD IN THE U.S., OR, HOW THE GAP CAMPAIGN GOT ROLLING**

The warriors selected to force the Gap’s image to “come in line with reality” might have seemed an unlikely choice. In July of ‘95, UNITE!, and the NLC flew three teenage employees of Central America’s maquilas to the U.S. for a whirlwind tour. Judith Yanira Viera, 18, was an employee of the Mandarin factory in El Salvador; Claudia Leticia Molina, 17, worked for a company in Honduras that sewed clothing for the Gitano label sold by Wal-Mart; Silvia Rodriguez, 16, worked for the GABO factory in El Salvador. None of these young women had ever traveled before. None of them spoke English. However, it took them no longer than their first major speaking event, the UNITE! founding convention in Miami, to establish that they were an excellent choice to carry the battle forward.

Alan Howard, assistant to the president of UNITE!, recalls “It was

an electrifying moment for the three thousand or so people in that room, to come face to face with these women from the maquilas, and hear about those conditions. For the first time, [members] saw people connected with what before had only been abstractions.”

The response to the convention presentation demonstrated the tour’s explosive potential as an organizing tool. According to Howard, “Literally five or six hundred of the delegates who heard these women speak signed up to help with UNITE’s work on the Gap campaign.” The tour went on to catalyze local organizing at each of its stops around the U.S. and Canada. Said Connie Hall of Chicago’s Women for Economic Justice (WEJ), “Things really got started locally when Chicago Jobs With Justice came to us to work together on the speaking tour. We were appalled when we heard of how women were abused in the free-trade zones, and we knew we had to get involved.” WEJ, a coalition dedicated in part to fighting international trade’s disproportionate exploitation of women, helped Jobs With Justice and UNITE! organize an “Adopt-a-Gap” picketing campaign that brought informational picket lines, rain or shine, to the doors of Chicago area Gap stores.

### **PERSISTENCE BRINGS THE GAP TO THE TABLE**

The tour of the three young workers, combined with a short NLC documentary video about the maquilas called *Zoned for Slavery*, awakened thousands of people across the U.S. to the Gap campaign. Press coverage in the major dailies—the Washington Post, Miami Herald, and a series of pieces in the New York Times by Bob Herbert—reached tens of thousands more. The NLC office, meanwhile, was cranking out updates on the situation at Mandarin that reached a contact list that seemed to grow with a life of its own.

The outreach continued throughout the fall and winter of ‘95. By that time, the campaign had grown to include a broad range of social action groups. The call for cross-border solidarity had reached student, fair trade, Central America solidarity, religious, and women’s organizations across the nation. They responded to the tour, video, and press pieces by flooding the Gap with informational picket lines, letters, and calls supporting the Mandarin workers.

Each group had creative ways of appealing to its particular constituency, and needling the Gap to come around. In Minnesota, Larry Weiss, of the Resource Center of the Americas and the Fair Trade Campaign, showed *Zoned for Slavery* in eighteen high schools and several colleges, reaching about 6,000 students. “It hits the kids pretty hard,” he said. “Inevitably, the kids say, ‘That’s really horrible, what can

I do about it?” He provided the students with addresses and sample letters and invited them to share their feelings with the Gap.

In Wisconsin, the Fair Trade Campaign coordinated several informational picket lines like those that sprang up at Gap stores all over the country. Said Jim Carpenter, volunteer coordinator of the Campaign’s coalition of unions, environmentalists, and social justice activists, “People enjoyed leafleting malls—the focus on fighting the abuse of women and children workers really struck a chord with people we would talk to.”

The result of the nationwide pressure? The Gap, in Kernaghan’s words, “Listened to the consumers and did the right thing.” An agreement signed on December 15, 1995 by the Gap and the NLC, in the presence of New York clergy, resolved the core issues that separated them. Among the high points of the agreement:

- The Gap, at one point determined to avoid all further conflict by pulling out of El Salvador, will make a good faith effort to return there under circumstances that will result in “humane and productive employment.”
- The Gap will continue to pressure Mandarin for the reinstatement of the fired union members.
- Observers from the Human Rights Ombuds Office will have immediate access to the Mandarin plant to monitor compliance with the Gap’s code of conduct for contracting plants. According to Kernaghan, “This is the first step to implementing independent monitoring of Gap contractors across Central America.”



## **THE CHALLENGE: LINKING WORKERS STRUGGLES**

The coming years will doubtless see our brothers and sisters in maquilas around the world repeatedly asking “*How is the U.S. labor movement going to create real international solidarity?*” Most often the question will come in the context of urgent, life-and-death conflicts like the one at Mandarin. A successful mobilization like the Gap campaign may hold some answers to such questions. It therefore demands much reflection. Many jobs and lives may depend on our ability to reproduce its strengths. A few lessons of the campaign:

- **Go broad with outreach in the name of worker rights.** Emphasize common ground between workers overseas and a range of organizations here in the U.S. Women’s organizations, for example, responded energetically to the call to defend the overwhelmingly female workforce at Mandarin.
- **Cut a winnable target out of a ponderous problem.** The Gap was only one of several corporations operating through Mandarin, but singling out their vulnerable “progressive” image opened the floodgate to overall changes at Mandarin.
- **Give the campaign handles for local activism.** Too often trade and even labor issues are reduced to dull, inert policy debates. Time and again activists on the Gap campaign commented that having specific form letters to copy and distribute, phone numbers to call the Gap, and informational pickets to get people out and working side by side energized volunteers and gave them a sense of their own power.
- **Put a human face on the issue.** Whether through the images shown in *Zoned for Slavery*, or the tour of the teen maquila workers, it was living, breathing people and their stories that inspired a fervor in many “Gapatistas.”

The final chapter of the Gap campaign remains to be written. The reinstatement of the SETMI workers to Mandarin, for example, is still in negotiations. In fact, the Gap is cautious enough about the proceedings that it wished to make no comment for this article beyond what was already public record. What is clear from the campaign, however, is that a powerful, broad-based coalition of U.S. labor, community, and religious groups can be mobilized on relatively short notice in the name of international solidarity. Such a coalition of “Gapatistas,” if guided by effective strategy, can even force a huge multinational to “do the right thing.” ■