

Are Workers Rights Human Rights?  
Ric McIntyre  
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Summary by Abbey Lyons

When we see a shirt on a rack for \$14, most of us are not aware that the shirt only costs \$5 to make. We don't realize that people are dying in order to make the shirts we purchase and wear. In most retail driven supply chains, profit gained from the markup of the good mostly goes to the merchant, not the worker who made it. Almost ¾ths of garment factory disasters happened in this decade, one known as the Rana Plaza collapsed and killed over 1,000 people and injured many more. Responses to these recent disasters have failed to change working conditions.

Looking back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the best cotton textiles and printed fabrics were being made in India. England knew nothing about producing printed cotton textiles, but their excellent Navy gave them the ability to conquer India. England proposed to India that they would produce textiles if India continued to produce the cotton. The India movement was soon destroyed shortly after England learned how to make textiles. In the past 30 years, production has migrated back to where it all started, in poor countries.

Most workers in these poor countries are making less than 75 cents an hour. The Corporate Social Responsibility regulation was an ineffective and failed response to these tragic disasters. Their organization was modeled in a way that removed them from any responsibilities within the workers conditions and environment instead of taking responsibility. A common phrase was "they don't work for us". This type of production is classified as a sweating system.

Instead of the work being completed in small shops or homes as in the past, the sweating system is now completed in factories. The creation of social distance between the manufacturer and the worker means the manufacturers can admit to having no knowledge of the workers' exploitation. Sweating has now become a general strategy used by companies. They are increasing social distance by offshoring, hiring temporary workers, and outsourcing.

Victims work mostly for big retailers at the top of the food chain such as Target, Walmart, H&M, and Nike. Most consumers are unaware of the disconnect between a brand and producers who make goods for the brand. These retailers put on a front by taking credit for their products when in reality, all they are doing is selling a brand. For example, Nike sells their customers the "swoosh" logo, not the sneaker. This is based on a system where those in control take no moral responsibility for the conditions of work.

Things haven't always been this way. War Capitalism gave birth to Industrial Capitalism. Once people got the right to vote, things changed. Industrial Capitalism occurred between 1815 and 1860 when there was growth of democracy and a tighter link between Industrial Capitalists and national states. After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, people got scared and that's when the Tripartite model was implemented and allowed everyone to have equal power and wages could be negotiated. This model worked well until the economic crisis of the 1970s. Capitalists were now looking for new sources for cheap labor and therefore attacking worker power. Over time, this led to the return of merchant capital.

The retail supply chain now dominates half of world trade. Promising models have been implemented to advocate for workers such as Alta Gracia and the International Union League. With the help of these organizations and all of society, we can prove to the world that workers rights are indeed human rights.