

Many of us do not know about the conditions under which the products we buy are produced. Americans know that many of the products they buy everyday come from other countries. Americans sell goods in their country that have been imported for industry ranging from shoe leather (about 65%) and clothing (about 45%) to computer equipment (about 40%) and petroleum (about 38%).

Child labor can be found in nearly every industry. An estimated 70% of children are performing forced labor work in agriculture, fishing, hunting, and forestry. Children work on farms picking bananas in Ecuador, oranges in Brazil, cocoa in the Ivory Coast, vegetables in California and cotton in Egypt. Children in commercial agriculture work long hours in extreme temperatures, suffer health risks from pesticides, earn little or no pay, and receive inadequate food, water, and sanitation.

Approximately 13 million children are estimated to be involved in manufacturing goods like carpets in India, clothing in Bangladesh, soccer balls in Pakistan and fireworks in China.

Children are working in mining operations around the world in places like Colombia, Brazil, Sierra Leone, and Mongolia. They are mining gold, charcoal, diamonds, coal and emeralds. Children as young as 6 or 7 years old break up rocks, and wash and carry ore. Nine-year-olds work underground setting explosives and carrying loads. Child laborers in underground mines and quarries suffer extremely high illness and injury rates.

The government of Uzbekistan is continuing to remove millions of children across the country from school and forcing them to pick cotton during the harvest season. While over 65 of the world's largest apparel brands and retailers have developed policies related to Uzbek cotton, two companies were known to remain silent. Gymboree and Abercrombie and Fitch were reported refusing to support human rights and speaking out against forced child labor in the cotton industry. Abercrombie and Fitch has since announced that it has a policy of not sourcing Uzbek cotton. (Source: Green America)

The Gap clothing company, which also owns Old Navy and Banana Republic, is one of the most successful clothing retailers in the world. And yet over time, The Gap has been accused of exploiting its workers all around the globe. The Gap Chairman has denied any abuses of its workers have ever occurred. In 2007, Indian authorities raided factories that produce clothing for the Gap and found children as young as 10 working there. Studies show that Gap workers from China, Thailand, Bangladesh and the Philippines must sign contracts before they are employed, giving up such human rights as the freedom to join unions, attend religious services, quit or marry. They work 12-16 hour days and are not paid for overtime. In Russia, workers earn 11 cents an hour. (Green America).

Some people argue that even if workers suffer in sweatshop conditions, many of these laborers are better off than they would be if they didn't have access to such jobs. Others argue that no human beings should have to work under such conditions.

Fair trade is an alternative approach to conventional trade and is based on a partnership between producers, communities, consumers and the environment. When farmers can sell on fair trade terms, it provides them with a better deal and improved terms of trade. Fair trade offers consumers a better way to reduce poverty and cruelty through every day shopping.

Fair trade outlines all sorts of protections and standards. These include opportunities for economically and socially marginalized producers. Transparent relationships are developed guaranteeing fair prices are paid and workers earn decent wages. They also have the right to join unions and are ensured safe working conditions. Children and their rights are protected.

Fair trade establishes environmentally sustainable practices, including organic certification and non-GMO products. It protects the environment in which people work and live. This includes clean air, natural water, virgin forests and waste management, as well as efficient farming techniques. Fair trade ensures a positive impact is made at all stages of the chain.

Consumers also benefit from fair trade. Shoppers can buy products in line with their values and principles. By buying fair trade, one supports producers who are working to improve their lives. There are now thousands of products that carry the fair trade mark. Fair trade standards exist for food products like tea, coffee, fresh fruit and nuts. There are also standards for products such as flowers and plants, sports equipment and seed cotton.

Sources: The Conference Board, New York Times, 3/20/03, The Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights <http://www.globallabourrights.org/>, "Child Labor Can Be Found in Nearly Every Industry," U.S. Department of Labor, The Social Welfare History Project