

DO ANY OF US REALLY WANT A “BARGAIN” BASED ON TRAFFICKING OF YOUNG WOMEN INTO INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE?

SEWING CLOTHING FOR WAL-MART, KOHL’S AND GAP YOUNG WOMEN RAPED BY MANAGEMENT

Western Factory

3 / 22 Al Hassan Industrial Estate
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Workforce: 260 foreign guest workers, 75 percent of them young women from **Bangladesh** and **India**.

- Four young women, including a 16-year-old girl, sexually abused by factory managers;
- Some 14 and 15 year-old child workers;
- Mandatory 16 to 20-hour shifts from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight or 4:00 a.m.;
- Forced to work seven days a week, with just four days off in ten months;
- At the factory 114 hours a week;
- Workers who pass out from exhaustion are hit with a ruler to wake them;
- Despite working 109 hours a week, the workers were not paid for six months;



- Even when the workers were lucky enough to be paid, they were still cheated of 65 percent of the wages legally due them, earning just \$25.38—or 23 cents an hour, for 109 hours of work;



- Sewers paid less than seven cents for each *Athletic Works* jacket they sewed for Wal-Mart;
- Anyone demanding their proper wages will be beaten and forcibly deported;
- Guest workers' passports are confiscated and—also lacking identification cards—they are virtual prisoners, unable to leave the free trade zone;
- Workers are slapped and punched for making mistakes;
- Workers are constantly hungry, since they are fed just half a piece of bread and weak tea for breakfast; one-and-a-half ounces of rice, three-quarters of an ounce of vegetables, and lentils for lunch; and a piece of bread and lentils for supper;
- Eight workers housed in each small 10-by-10-foot, windowless room, which during the summer is so unbearably hot that it is almost impossible to sleep;
- Dorms often lack water three or four days a week, making it impossible to bathe; stench from the bathroom is so strong women often report vomiting, and bathrooms also lack toilet paper, soap and towels;
- Wal-Mart owes these workers at least \$1,593 each in back wages. –Will they pay it?

The Indian-owned **Western** factory is a one-story, tin-roofed building located in Al Hassan Industrial Estate. According to the workers it is crowded, dirty and noisy, and the tin roof radiates even more heat during the summer, leaving the workers dripping in sweat. In the winter it is freezing.

In 2005, there were approximately 280 workers at the factory, including 225 guest workers from Bangladesh and 35 from India. Seventy-five percent of the workers were young women. There were also 20 Jordanian workers, who were mostly supervisors. There were at least 10 child workers at the factory who could not have been more than 14 or 15 years of age. (Many people in Bangladesh do not have birth certificates, so when they sign a contract to work in Bangladesh and receive their passports, some children simply write in that they are 19 or 20 years of age, though it is obvious they are not.)

For a ten-month period, August 2004 through May 2005, **60 percent of Western's production was for Wal-Mart, while 40 percent was for GAP.** In the first quarter of 2006, Western was sewing *Sonoma* jeans for *Kohl's*.

The vast majority of production for Wal-Mart was *Athletic Works* fleece jackets for children and adults in multiple colors—yellow, gray, red, blue, black and green, some with zippers or half zippers, and some with hoods. The production for GAP was thin pajama pants for men, also in various colors with elastic waistbands.

TYPICAL DAILY SHIFT 16 TO 20 HOURS A DAY	
8:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.	Work, 5 ½ hours
1:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.	Lunch, ½ hour
2:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.	Work, 6 hours
8:00 p.m. to 8:10 p.m.	Tea, 10 minutes
8:10 p.m. to 12 midnight or 4:00 a.m.	Work, 3.83 hours to 7.83 hours

TYPICAL SEVEN-DAY WORKWEEK AT WESTERN <i>AT THE FACTORY 114 HOURS WHILE WORKING 109</i>	
Saturday	8:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight At work 16 hours, working 15.33 hours
Sunday	8:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. At work 20 hours, working 19 hours
Monday	8:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight At work 16 hours, working 15.33 hours
Tuesday	8:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. At work 20 hours, working 19 hours
Wednesday	8:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight At work 16 hours, working 15.33 hours
Thursday	8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. At work 14 hours, working 13.5 hours
Friday	8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. At work 12 hours, working 11.5 hours
At the factory 114 hours, while working 108.99 hours	

Western is a subcontract factory, receiving regular work from several larger factories, including **Al Safa, Needle Craft, Topaz** (all reported on in this study) and **Classic**.

GRUELING HOURS

- Routine 16-to-20-hour shifts, from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight or 4:00 a.m.;
- Working seven days a week;
- At the factory 114 hours while working 109 hours a week;
- Workers who fall asleep from exhaustion are hit with a ruler to wake them;
- Sixty-plus overtime hours each week, exceeding Jordan's legal limit by 439 percent!

It was only when Western workers were kept past midnight that they were allowed a half-hour supper break from 9:00 to 9:30 p.m. Otherwise they did not eat supper until after they returned home around 12:30 a.m.

Only on Fridays, which is the legal weekly holiday, were the workers allowed out "early" at 8:00 or 10:00 p.m. after putting in a 12-to-14-hour shift.

At least 70 percent of the time, every guest worker had to work the 20-hour all-night shifts. Thirty percent of the time, approximately half the workers had to stay for the 20-hour shifts. It all depended on the factory's production needs.

The workers were actually putting in two 40-hour shifts each week, for example from 8:00 Sunday morning to 12:00 midnight on Monday, with just four hours off, allowing the workers less than three hours of sleep. In the



global sweatshop economy, the 40-hour shift has now replaced the 40-hour workweek.

Understandably, workers sometimes fell asleep from exhaustion while at the factory. Supervisors would yell at them, and if they did not perk up right away, strike them with a long wooden ruler.

The guest workers did not have a single Friday off in the ten months from August 2004 to May 2005. They received just two days off for each of the two Eid religious holidays.

NO WAGES FOR SIX MONTHS

From December 2004 through May 2005, the guest workers at the Western factory were not paid, despite being forced to routinely work 109 hours a week. Sometimes the owner would “loan” the workers five dollars or ten dollars a month. It was that simple. The owner stopped paying wages for six months and anyone who complained too loudly would be beaten and forcibly deported. That would leave them trapped in misery, with no hope of ever receiving any of their back wages, while still facing the large debts they incurred in Bangladesh, taking loans at exorbitant interest rates in order to purchase their three-year contracts to work in Jordan at the Western factory.

Even when the guest workers were being paid for the four months between August and November 2004, they were being paid, at best, just 36 percent of the wages legally due them. At most the workers were paid just \$25.38 for the routine 109-hour workweek, which comes to just 23 cents an hour. At a minimum, the workers should have been paid \$71.48 --\$27.69 for the regular 48 hours of work and \$43.79 for the 60.82 hours of mandatory overtime, at the legal premium of 25 percent, or 72 cents an hour. The 60-plus hours of overtime each week exceeded Jordan’s legal limit by 439 percent! The workers were cheated of \$46.10 in wages legally due them each week. They were losing 65 percent of their legal wages, while sewing clothing for Wal-Mart and GAP.

In the ten-month period that the young guest workers at the Western factory sewed Wal-Mart fleece jackets and GAP pajamas, they were robbed of \$2,655.50 each in wages legally due them. This is an enormous amount of money for the guest workers from Bangladesh and India, who are some of the hardest working, yet poorest people in the world.

Wal-Mart, the largest retailer in the world, owes these workers \$1,593 each, given that Wal-Mart accounted for 60 percent of total production, while GAP owes them \$1,062. Will Wal-Mart and GAP pay these workers what they are owed?

Cheating the workers: Besides arbitrarily not paying wages for months at a time—and this is going on again right now, as Western management has paid no wages in 2006—when management does pay any wages, as we have seen, they routinely cheat the workers of up to 65 percent of the wages legally due them.

The primary method management uses is to set mandatory daily production goals which are excessively high, meaning the workers have no choice but to remain working without pay until the goal is met. Each day the workers are forced to work four or five or six hours of overtime without pay. For example, the assigned goal for a production line of 45 sewing operators is to complete 150 Wal-Mart *Athletic Works* fleece jackets in one hour. This is impossibly high, and the workers can realistically finish just 100 to 110 jackets an hour. In this way, the uncompleted work builds up all day, requiring the workers to make it up at night without pay.

The Western guest workers are also cheated in many other ways. Sick days are not allowed, and anyone too ill to work will be marked absent for three days for every day they miss. One month’s wage is also withheld and though it is supposed to be returned, the workers will never see this money again either. Management also charges these workers five dollars a month for bus transportation back and forth from the dorm to the factory. A five percent social services tax is also deducted each month from the workers’ wages. It is supposed to be returned in full when the worker’s contract is over, but

Wal-Mart

A major player in Jordan

In a single month, Wal-Mart imports \$3.4 million dollars' worth of Athletic Works garments made in Jordan.

Tracking just one Wal-Mart label, Athletic Works, over the course of a single month, December 2005, and using data drawn from U.S. Customs Department shipping records, we were able to uncover **56 shipments** from Jordan to Wal-Mart **containing hundreds of thousands of Athletic Works** garments entering the U.S. duty free with a **wholesale value of \$3,366,829**. And remember, this is just one of Wal-Mart's dozens of labels over just a one-month period.

Behind Wal-Mart's "Everyday Low Prices" are fabric from China, and thousands of indentured servants.

The **landed customs value** of the following Athletic Works garments made in Jordan **reflects Wal-Mart's total cost of production**, including all materials and accessories, direct and indirect labor, profit to the factory in Jordan and even shipping costs.

Behind Wal-Mart's bargains are cheap goods made by thousands of workers being held under conditions of indentured servitude, forced to work 100 hours a week while being cheated of at least half of the wages legally due them. The use of slave labor in Jordan is complimented by cheap fabric from China. This is Wal-Mart's low-price secret.

WAL-MART COST OF PRODUCTION

Dazzle shorts with mesh piecing <i>(Athletic Works-AW16K200)</i>	\$0.73
Dazzle muscle with mesh piecing <i>(Athletic Works—AW45A101B)</i>	\$1.00
100% polyester star workout top <i>(Athletic Works—AW351604X)</i>	\$3.03
Dazzle shorts with contrast waistband <i>(Athletic Works—AW45A101B)</i>	\$3.24
Men's reversible shorts <i>(Athletic Works—AW45A101B)</i>	\$3.68
Ladies 100% poly mesh hoodie <i>(Athletic Works—AW351604X)</i>	\$4.24

never is. Management pockets this money as well. The workers were promised free health care and medicines, which was also a lie. During winter, in the near freezing temperatures, and without heat in the dorm or factory, the workers' hands and fingers often swell up and their skin cracks. When they ask for hand cream or medicine, management tells the workers to buy their own. In another case, when one of the women fell sick, with her leg infected and swollen and her skin cracked and discolored, several workers went to management seeking medicine for their colleague. The manager responded that the company does not pay for medicines, and that the workers had to pay for it themselves. When the women protested, the manager responded, ***"If you keep talking like that, you'll be sent back to Bangladesh."***

It was the same when outside buyers came to the plant. If approached, the workers were instructed to respond that everything was fine and that they were happy working here. If they did not follow the script, and instead told the truth about factory conditions, they

would be immediately deported without their back wages. The only benefit the workers received from the buyers' visits was that on these days, they did eat lunch at 1:00 p.m. and the men with the sticks were nowhere to be seen.



SEWERS PAID JUST SEVEN CENTS FOR EACH WAL-MART FLEECE JACKET THEY SEW:

As we have seen, an assembly line of 45 sewing operators must complete 150 *Athletic Works* fleece jackets each hour. In effect, this means that the workers are allowed 18 minutes, or 30 percent of an hour, to sew each jacket. Given that the workers are paid, when they are paid at all, an average wage of just 23 cents an hour (not even one half of the legal minimum wage), **they are earning less than seven cents for each Wal-Mart jacket they sew.** Of course, it is a better bargain for Wal-Mart when the workers are not paid at all.

The fabric used for Wal-Mart's jackets also came from China. So, here we have a case of Wal-Mart's fleece jackets being made at the Western factory in Jordan, using Chinese textiles, by young guest workers held in involuntary servitude and often not paid, entering the U.S. duty free.

ABUSIVE & ILLEGAL WORKING CONDITIONS AT THE WESTERN FACTORY:

- **SEXUAL ABUSE OF YOUNG WOMEN:** It is very difficult for the women workers to speak of their being sexually abused. It is so painful and humiliating. But also, the stigma of such abuse can destroy any hope of marriage and a decent future. But several young women, in their anger and despair, were willing to confide to their Bangladeshi colleagues. At least four young women have been sexually abused by Western managers, including a 16 year-old girl. The other women were in their early 20's. Managers would pick out the cutest young women and offer them the false promise of a better job, higher wages, less work, and so on. They would also tell the girls that they wanted to take them on a day trip, so they could see how beautiful Jordan was. Once in the car, they would drive them to a hotel and force themselves on the

young women. The women were powerless. Stripped of their passports and with nowhere to turn, they were completely vulnerable to abuse. No one in Jordan had ever helped them, not once. There was no one to turn to, even to report the abuse. So they just went back to work, crushed.

- **ROUTINE BEATINGS AND THREATS:** For making mistakes, workers could be slapped very hard, and their wages could also be docked. Even when the workers were not being paid, the owner still threatened them that he would deduct money from whatever they were paid in the future. The supervisors, who were Jordanian men, would also constantly pressure the women to work faster. They would routinely yell and shout at the workers and also shove them. And as has been mentioned, workers who passed out from exhaustion would be struck with a ruler to wake them. Fear hung over all the workers. Everyone knew that if they raised their voice to make even the most modest demands, like that they receive at least part of their wages, the owner would bring in local gang members—who the workers called “muscle men”—to beat them. With no one in Jordan to turn to, there was no way out of this constant intimidation.
- **A LIVING HELL:** Life for the guest workers at Western was a living hell. Their dorm was a single-story building outside the industrial park. Eight workers were housed in each 10-by-10-foot room, where the workers slept on narrow double-level bunk beds, using cheap thin foam rubber pads for mattresses. There were no windows in the rooms, and the combination of the extreme summer heat and lack of ventilation made sleeping almost impossible. On the other hand, during winter, especially in January, February and March, it was freezing. In the dorm, especially during the summer, there was often no access to running water for three or four days a week. Despite being soaked in sweat all day and then returning to a stifling room, the workers could not bathe. It was even worse with the toilets. Twenty-five workers had to share each toilet, which lacked even toilet paper, soap and towels. When there was

Worker bunk beds.

no water for days, the stench around the toilets was unbearable. Many women reported vomiting when they had to use the bathroom.

While at work, the workers needed permission to use the toilet, and were limited to just three uses during the typical 16-hour shift. If workers took too long, they would be yelled at and slapped.

The workers were also promised decent food, but they were routinely underfed and felt constantly in hunger. For breakfast, they received just a half piece of pita bread and very weak tea, which the workers said was more like hot water. After working 5 ½ hours, the workers were given a lunch of one and a half ounces of rice, dahl (lentils), and three quarters of an ounce of vegetables. Even the dahl was watered down. After working ten more hours, the workers would be given supper at around 12:30 a.m., receiving just one piece of pita bread and some watered-down dahl. The workers were promised meat, which they never received. Nor were they ever provided any fruit.

Women in Bangladesh who worked at Western in 2004

before they were forcibly deported also described the food they received as horrible, and thought it must be leftovers since they frequently got sick from it. Nor was the factory cafeteria a pleasant place, according to them. **Three men carrying sticks patrolled the dining area, and if any worker dared to ask for more food—more rice or curry—they would be beaten with sticks.**

There are women workers from the Western factory, who were forcibly returned to Bangladesh after asking for their rights, who are ready to testify regarding the physical beatings they suffered.

LOCKED IN A VAN, BEATEN AND DEPORTED:

In desperation, in February 2005, a group of 10 workers – eight women and two men – sought a meeting with the owner of the Western Factory. The workers had not been paid correctly in six months, and without that money they were falling behind in their interest payments. For just the last six months, the original \$885 loan they had taken to purchase the work contract had grown to \$1,416. They went to plead with the owner: the workers needed their full legal wages and better food. The owner said he was ready to consider their demands. Shortly after that the group of 10 workers were told it was necessary for them to go out for a blood test. Of course, it was just a ruse and **the workers were locked in the van for two days, given only bread to eat, and beaten. The two men were beaten very badly. All ten were then driven to the airport and put on a plane back to Bangladesh, without any of the back wages owed them.**



Today these workers and their families remain trapped in debt, unable to pay off the money they borrowed to purchase these work contracts in Jordan.

UPDATE:

In January 2006, the abusive conditions at the Western factory remained unchanged. Workers sewing the *Sonoma* label for Kohl's are still being beaten, forced to work seven days a week, including working at least three all-night shifts a week.

As of April 30, the Western guest workers have received no wages in 2006. The only difference as of April is that now the workers can receive Friday off—but only if they work a 24-hour shift on Thursday, straight through from 8:00 Thursday morning to 8:00 a.m. Friday. This puts them at the factory 101 ½ to 104 hours a week, while working 97 to 99 ½ hours.

We have confirmed that Wal-Mart's hooded fleece jacket continues to be sewn at the Western Factory at least through February 2006, meaning Wal-Mart was in the Western factory for over a year and a half, while accounting for the majority of production under these brutal and abusive conditions.

GAP IS NOT WAL-MART:

Over years of experience, we have come—sadly—to expect to find Wal-Mart in the very worst factories. So Wal-Mart's being the majority of production at the abusive Western factory does not surprise us. Gap is another story. Though very far from perfect, our experience shows that Gap will at least listen seriously to allegations of violations at its contractors' plants, and sometimes even do the right thing to correct those abuses. We would put Gap among the more decent companies, along with Levi Strauss, Phillips Van Heusen, Liz Claiborne, and Sears. We hope and expect that Gap will intervene with the Western factory to bring it into compliance with Jordan's labor laws, including reimbursing the workers for the back wages they are owed.

COMPANY CONTACT INFORMATION

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DUTY FREE ACCESS TO THE U.S. MARKET

The **U.S.-Jordan Free Trade Agreement** went into effect in **December 2001**, making Jordan just the fourth country to have a free trade agreement with the U.S. Goods made in Jordan can enter the U.S. duty-free as long as 35 percent of the products appraised import value can be attributed to direct processing in Jordan.

Jordan has actually enjoyed duty-free access to the U.S. market since **1998**, when the U.S. government initiated a **Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ)** program, which allowed goods made in approved parks duty-free access. These goods had to meet the same 35 percent threshold for direct processing costs, but had to include at least eight percent processing completed in Israel. The Jordan QIZ share of the processing had to reach 11.7 percent, while the remaining 20 percent could be made up in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank or the U.S.

Free trade zone and QIZ factories in Jordan that export to the U.S. duty-free are also exempt from ***almost all local Jordan taxes***. Factories are exempt from:

- All income tax on corporate profits;
- All income and social services taxes on the salaries and allowances paid to non-Jordanian workers;
- All import and export duties on raw materials, parts and finished goods for export; and,
- All licensing fees as well as local building and land taxes.

Factories can also repatriate 100 percent of their profits to their country of origin.

In May of 2002, Jordan entered a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union, which calls for the elimination of all tariffs, to be phased in over a 12 year period.

Jordan became a member of the World Trade Organization in April 2000. It is interesting to note that as a condition of WTO admission, Jordan had to pass several new laws to improve the protection of intellectual property rights and trademarks. The U.S.-Jordan Free Trade Agreement demanded even stronger enforcement of intellectual property rights.

Evidently worker rights protections were not considered as important.