The problem with "made in the U.S.A." you don't know about [1]

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EXCERPTS

Most of us don't think twice about buying a $7 T-shirt. That's a big bargain. But is it a good deal? Probably not for the workers who earned pennies to make it. You may think that a "Made In America" label means "Not Made In a Sweatshop," but the reality of fast-fashion manufacturing in the U.S. might shock you.

The garment workers of Los Angeles, which is the capital of the American clothing-manufacturing industry, are grossly underpaid — we're talking wages as low as $3.80 an hour. If that's not enough to give you pause, then take into account that it's not just hurting the workers.

Nearly every working parent struggles to find and pay for day care. But for the garment workers in L.A who sew clothes for some of your favorite brands, quality child care is a distant dream. These women (and they're mostly women) often work 10-to-12-hour days, six days a week, for what ends up being less than $15,000 a year — right at the poverty line in California, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Most factories pay workers on a piece-by-piece basis — as in pennies per item: three cents to hem a skirt, five cents to sew a sleeve, 11 cents to set a zipper.

Paying workers per piece is technically legal, as long as employers obey minimum-wage laws. California's minimum wage is $9 an hour, and new law will raise it to $15 in Los Angeles by 2020. If workers don't sew enough pieces in an hour to earn the minimum wage, factories are supposed to make up the difference.

But they don't. "It never happens," says Mar Martinez, organizing coordinator at the Garment Worker Center, which provides resources and support for the 45,000 workers in L.A.'s garment manufacturing industry. She knows firsthand the struggle many sewing workers face: Her mother is a garment worker, and when Martinez was growing up, she and her older sister were the caregivers for their younger siblings and five cousins who lived with them.

"That's what ends up happening," Martinez says. "Not only are folks making really low wages; they're never home. You hardly see your mom. The oldest ends up being the caretaker, because you can't afford childcare."

And things have barely changed since Martinez was a kid. She says per-piece rates in the industry haven't gone up in 30 years; in fact, a recent NPR story suggests garment workers' wages have dropped by half since the 1990s. Meanwhile, the cost of living has skyrocketed.

"The most stark finding that we have come across is just how much garment workers are spending on childcare a week," says Marissa Nuncio, director of the Garment Worker Center. "It's an average one-third of their income." And, in some cases, even more: Child Care Aware, a national child-care research and advocacy group, reports that "single parents with two children should expect to pay over 75% of income on center-based care, and a married couple with two children living at the poverty line will pay over 80% of their income on center-based care."

"This is a conversation that we constantly have at the factory," says Luz, a garment-industry worker (who requested I use just her first name). "About how expensive child care is, about how difficult it is for your child to be accepted into [a day care], about how the wait-list for child care is so, so long." Many workers aren't even aware of the benefits available to them — programs like Head Start — because they assume they are only available to U.S. citizens. Luz pays a woman to pick up her daughter, Azul, from school, and watch her for a few hours until Luz gets off work. It costs about a third of Luz's income.

Most of us assume that sweatshops exist only in unregulated corners of the globe — that "Made in the USA" and "Made by Exploited Workers" are mutually exclusive. In 2013, after the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh collapsed and killed 1,134 people, there was a lot of pressure on brands like Benetton, the Children's Place, Joe Fresh, and Mango, all of which used the factory — to improve standards and regulations. Many of those companies did step up, and changes were made. But two years later, most of us still don't know where our clothes come from.

"When we do presentations and talk to the public, folks are just floored," Nuncio says. "They assume if it says 'Made in the USA' it must at least mean minimum wage. And it does not."

Even though the Garment Worker Center says L.A. workers are sewing clothes for major labels at sweatshop wages, it was tough for the Center to name names. The work is usually done in independently owned factories run by sub-contractors, which means the brands pay the factories, not the workers directly. Clothing brands ask several factories to bid on a specific job (say, to produce an order of lace-trimmed shirts or patch-pocket jeans), and the order almost always goes to the lowest bidder, which is usually independently operated. Sometimes, the bid is as low as $1.20 per garment.

After factory owners cover basic expenses, that doesn't leave much to pay their workers. Last year, U.S. Department of Labor investigators found that, in L.A. alone, 1,549 local garment workers were owed more than $3 million in unpaid wages. The contract nature of the work makes it easy for some brands to ignore the wage problem or deny that it exists, but federal regulators have cited brands such as Nasty Gal, Joe's Jeans, Forever 21, and Charlotte Russe for selling clothes that were produced in factories with wage violations.

How do these sub-contractors get away with paying their employees so little? For one thing, many garment workers are undocumented and don't realize that they have a right to the minimum wage. Factory owners have been know to threaten to terminate their jobs — or even call U.S. immigration enforcement — if they demand higher wages. When workers do seek help from the Garment Worker Center, which helps them file formal complaints with the Labor Commission, employers usually get a month's notice before they're required to show their records to the commission. That gives owners time to temporarily shut down, or to close up shop and reopen under a different name.

"We had one employer just go to Korea for a month, and then reopen under a different name or a relative's name," Martinez says. "And it's like, same factory, same workers, same machines." But because the ownership is technically different, it's not accountable for the prior wage complaint.

If the brands themselves are often willfully ignorant about the conditions in which their clothes are made, how are individual consumers supposed to figure it out?

"You have to really think about it when you're buying something," Martinez says. "If you're buying a shirt that's $7, for example, and you know that the minimum wage is $9, you're saying this one $7 garment probably took at least 30 minutes to make, plus travel to get here, and there's a lot of people that worked on that garment." The numbers really don't add up.

That's where you come in. You can choose to be a conscientious buyer. You can choose to understand what goes into making even the simplest of garments. You can choose to think about the true cost of a $7 shirt. It might be a bargain for you, but not such a good deal for another woman out there who's struggling to support her children. Only you can say if it's worth it.

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