

Bring on the World: Teacher's sheet

The global sportswear industry

Factories in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe produce footballs, boots and shirts for big sportswear companies. Workers often work very long hours in poor conditions for little pay.

'We have endless overtime in the peak season and we sit working non-stop for 13 or 14 hours a day. We sewing workers work like this every day: we sew and sew without stopping till our arms feel stiff and sore.

(Worker in a factory in China producing sportswear for Umbro)

A generation ago, a lot of sportswear was manufactured in the country in which it was sold. Sportswear companies owned factories, and employed workers to make their goods. Nowadays, trade liberalisation and information technologies allow companies to have their sportswear made in countries where wages are lower and regulations looser. The result of this is that many people in developing countries work for long hours in terrible conditions, making sportswear they could never afford to buy.

At the heart of all sport is a sense of absolute fair play. However, the situation for workers who produce sportswear is far from fair. They are often denied their basic rights to earn a living wage and to work under acceptable conditions.

Branded sportswear companies manage the high-profit steps in the process – design, advertising and retailing – themselves; but the less profitable stages, such as manufacturing, finishing and packaging, are contracted out to suppliers abroad. There is a lot of competition amongst factories for these contracts, and buyers for the sportswear companies can put pressure on factories to offer ever lower prices. This encourages factories to cut their costs by paying workers as little as they can, and by employing them on temporary and insecure contracts.

Big companies are increasingly passing costs and risks down to those lower in the supply chain. Instead of placing large orders and giving factories plenty of notice to fill them, they tend to place small orders at short notice. This means consumers can have the latest fashions in the shops, but factories overseas don't know whether they will have enough work to stay in business. Most factories employ workers on temporary contracts with no right to sick pay or maternity benefits. Indeed, workers are sometimes prevented from resigning, as factories hold back their pay during peak periods. Frequently, they are paid according to pieces completed, rather than on an hourly rate, which means they often earn below the official minimum wage.

Employers will often charge workers for dormitory accommodation, and they fine them for mistakes or for 'offences' such as taking days off. Although the right to join a union is recognised in most countries – most of them have signed up to the International Labor Organisation's Declaration on Fundamental Rights at Work – many workers who try to join unions are harassed or sacked.

Because factory owners want to spend as little money as possible, working environments in these factories are often unhealthy. They may be poorly ventilated and contaminated by chemicals. Apart from exhaustion, workers may suffer from repetitive strain injury and from

other ailments such as headaches. Their family lives suffer because of the long hours they work.

Opinions differ as to what the solution to this problem is. Oxfam believes that sportswear brands should take responsibility for workers making their clothes by setting up and enforcing ethical trading policies.