NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

THE VILLAGE VOICE, DECEMBER 11, 2001

THE GLOBAL ECONOMY, AS TOLD THROUGH A TEE

RETAIL IS A SEASONAL BUSINESS, SO IBRAHIM, a Senegalese immigrant who has taken to introducing himself as Abraham since September 11, is constantly adjusting his stock. Lately, his Chelsea establishment—a wobbly folding table set up on the sidewalk of Sixth Avenue—has been piled high with gloves, scarves, and knitted polyester hats. The stack of T-shirts changes, too, as Ibrahim tries to stay a step ahead of demand. Over the last couple of weeks, sensing how public sentiment has shifted, he has replaced his inventory of "United We Stand" shirts with "In Memory, FDNY." The 50-50 cotton-polyester blended tops go for $7.50—among the highest-priced items he sells. "These slowed down now, too," he says of the 9-11 commemorative-apparel. "Customers not so interested anymore." • True enough, the competitors at a kiosk three blocks north are peddling an astounding variety of 9-11 T-shirts and baseball caps at fire-sale prices. Loki, an eighth grader just sprouting a moustache, hands over a three-color, all-cotton Fruit of the Loom tee for $2, making, he calculates, a profit of 40 cents. The elaborate design features gold-outlined numbers—09-11-01—with the twin towers forming the oversized 11, all of it superimposed over a bright American flag. Underneath, gilded letters in a florid script plead, "God Bless America," and above, red block printing asserts, "We are the greatest nation in the world, any evil can't destroy our peace and freedom."

Two nights after the attack on the World Trade Center, Loki and his dad stayed up affixing the freshly minted iron-on patterns to dozens of shirts. Completing production themselves cut costs—at the wholesaler up the street, Fashion Warehouse (NY) Inc., WTC tees go for $24 per dozen, whereas the decals and plain tees together averaged $1.60 each. The immigrant entrepreneurs weren't concerned about the slogans' twisted English—a language Loki's Hindi-speaking dad doesn't know, in any case. Nor did they notice that the shirts themselves were "Made in China," "Assembled in Bangladesh," and "Hecho en El Salvador."

These pushcart peddlers of the new turn-of-the-century were resolutely toiling to supply a demand and make an honest buck, navigating the currents of a thriving underground economy that, they expect, will carry them into the American dream. Loki, who attributed his

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mid-day absence from school to "an Indian festival," offered an additional motivation for selling the 9-11 goods: "We love America. We are patriotic with everyone."

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE MARX TO SEE CAPIT-alism's contradictions surging from the surface of a shirt with "God Bless America" on the chest and "Made in Honduras" on the label. The contradictions only glared more garishly when President Bush urged us to express our patriotism—and celebrate "our way of life"—by going shopping. That relatively comfy way of life depends, of course, on the accessibility—the cheapness—of consumer goods. Even as the wages of the middle and working classes decline (while the wealthy rake in ever more riches), we still have to be able to afford fancy sneakers and trendy clothes, DVDs and MP3s, SUVs and the gas they guzzle.

About 85 percent of all clothes Americans buy are made overseas, a market valued at some $260 billion a year, according to the textile and garment workers union UNITE. The apparel industry, though hardly unique, offers the baldest example of how companies push consumer prices down—and profits up—by perpetually decreasing their most controllable cost of production: labor. According to a National Labor Committee investigation, labor costs can represent as little as two-tenths of one percent of the $14.89 price tag on a shirt made in El Salvador. That is, the worker gets three cents.

Moreover, in making the shirt, she's likely to have been exposed to toxic chemicals, put in shifts of 12 hours or more, and endured seven-day workweeks. If she gets fed up and talks to other workers about forming a union, she's likely to get fired. "I feel secure saying that any T-shirt made in El Salvador is made in a sweatshop or *maquila* where the pay is *below a living wage, the conditions terrible,* and the ability of workers to organize nonexistent," says David Amdur of the Committee in Solidarity With the People of El Salvador.

That's pretty much the case in the entire industry, anti-sweatshop advocates say, including in the U.S., where a mostly immigrant workforce slogs away in urban factories not much different from the ones back home. Garment shops that do uphold labor standards—like the Athletic Cap Company in Brooklyn—can't stay afloat unless they find a niche willing to pay for treating the workers like human beings. Co-owner Artie Farkas, who does a lot of business with unions, says a cap that costs him $2.50 to make costs 80 cents to make in China. Despite his intense post-9-11 emotions, he says, "I didn't even think about making caps with American flags. How could I compete?"

In the chain where Loki is a link, earning 40 cents on a shirt his cousin, say, stitched together for three cents, the factory owner and the distributor got the biggest chunks of the $2 (reduced) retail price. When merchandise moves through the more legitimate economy into the department stores, discount chains, and upscale boutiques, the high costs of branding and advertising jack the prices—and, again, the profits—way up. Thus, execs and shareholders in the apparel industry, with a little help from a panoply of corporate-friendly free-trade agreements, get steadily richer, and the rest of us enjoy "our way of life" on the sweat of workers in and from developing countries.

Indeed, that our credit-card patriotism depends on such inequities may go a long way toward answering a question that has bizarrely befuddled the TV pundits for the last two months: Why do they hate us? Even Henry Kissinger recently noted that "ideological radicalism" breeds "in a two-tiered system of globalized elites living behind security gates . . . while the populations at large are tempted by nationalism, ethnicity, and a variety of movements to free themselves."

Nonetheless, at the World Trade Organization summit that ended recently in Doha, Qatar, the U.S. did all it could to deflect agricultural, labor, environmental, and economic demands from developing countries, extolling unfettered capitalism as the god that truly blesses America, never mind what it does to the rest of the world. According to Caroline Lucas, a Green member of the European Parliament who was an official delegate there, "Doha spells disaster for poor people."

In an account of the talks in London's *Observer*, Lucas notes that developing countries pleaded for a delay on tariff reductions so that a study of their effects on local industries and jobs could be undertaken. "Their request was ignored," she writes, "and as a result, they face further decimation of their economies." As an example she cites Senegal—Ibrahim's homeland—which was persuaded to open its markets by cutting industrial tariffs by almost half, and thus suffered the loss of one-third of its manufacturing jobs. And thousands of apparel and textile workers have been laid off in Pakistan in the last two months alone, in the wake of a two-thirds decline in business from the U.S., which imported $1.9 billion in goods from there last year; textile and apparel manufacturing employs some 60 percent of Pakistan's industrial workforce.

Back on the home front, Congress genuflects to the free market by passing corporate giveaways that favor the behemoths like General Motors and IBM—as well as the medium-sized, Texas-based energy companies that gave big donations to the Republicans in the last election. The "economic stimulus" package passed by the House near the end of last month offers them retroactive relief from the Alternative Minimum Tax—the only means of preventing profitable corporations from evading all tax liability through a range of loopholes.

At the same time, Bush appeals to "national security" to push through fast-track legislation—which would give the administration new trade-negotiation power to strike deals without any input from Congress. And the airline bailout rescued that industry's execs, but left 100,000 laid-off workers to sink in the accelerating downturn. As a result of all these domestic policies, America's income gap keeps expanding, further stepping up the need for cheap consumer goods, further accelerating the cycle. As Bill Moyers put it in a recent speech, the corporations are "counting on you to stand at attention with your hand over your heart, pledging allegiance to the flag, while they pick your pocket."

Some people have scorned the street vendors for trying to turn a buck on the tragedy of September 11. But Loki, Ibrahim, and all the others hawking jingoistic wares are not the catastrophe's true profiteers. No, those would be the corporations busily plundering the public coffers here and pressing for ever more self-serving agreements abroad while counting on the complacent consumers who buy their goods to ignore the misery of the people who make them.

Ibrahim shrugged when asked what he thought about selling NYPD and FDNY T-shirts made in Mexico and Korea. "I don't know anything about that," he said, referring the question to "the Chinese people" he bought them from. But having left his family behind and crossed a vast ocean to have a go at a better life in America, he knows everything about it.

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