

Clothes for a Change

Quotes of the Month:

“When the planes still swoop down and aerial spray a field in order to kill a predator insect with pesticides, we are in the Dark Ages of commerce. Maybe one thousandth of this aerial insecticide actually prevents the infestation. The balance goes to the leaves, into the soil, into the water, into all forms of wildlife, into ourselves. What is good for the balance sheet is wasteful of resources and harmful to life.”

Paul Hawken, The Ecology of Commerce (1993)

“It’s sundown on the union. Made in the USA. Sure was a good idea, until greed took it all away.”

Bob Dylan, “Sundown on the Union,” Infidels (1983)

“Today young, mostly female workers in Bangladesh, a Muslim country that is the fourth-largest garment producer for the United States market, are paid an average of 1.6 cents for each baseball cap with a Harvard logo that they sew. The caps retail at the Harvard bookstore for \$17, which means the garment workers, who often are younger than the Harvard students, are being paid a tenth of 1 percent of the cap’s price in the market.... Don’t we have the consumer and political power to pressure our corporations to end sweatshop wages being paid to the people who make these goods?”

Charles Kernaghan, Director of the National Labor Committee and Tom Hayden, former California state senator, “Pennies an Hour and No Way Up,” New York Times Op Ed (July 6th, 2002)

Clothes for a Change: Challenging Pesticides, Biotech Cotton, and Sweatshops

Thanks to several decades of effective public education and campaigning by food activists, the slogan, “you are what you eat” has now been internalized by a broad cross-section of millions of health conscious and politically aware consumers. Among the currents of consumer activism, global resistance against genetically engineered (GE) food and crops has become one of the most widespread and powerful grassroots move-

ments in the world today, short-circuiting plans by Monsanto and the Gene Giants to tamper with the world’s food supply and control the livelihoods of two billion farmers and rural villagers.

As awareness of the health, environmental, and socio-economic hazards of chemical-intensive agriculture and genetic engineering has spread globally, so has the demand for organic foods, produced in a sustainable manner by family farmers and traditional rural communities.

Organic food is the fastest growing segment of American agriculture. At current rates of growth, most of the \$360 billion in food sold at the retail level in the US will be organic by the year 2020. In Europe the organic market is growing even more rapidly. Farmers in 130 nations are growing certified organic food; only four nations (US, Canada, Argentina, China) are growing genetically engineered crops on a commercial scale.

America’s Fashion Statement: Pesticides, Frankencrops, and Sweatshops

Compared to awareness about food issues, public consciousness and responsible consumer purchasing in regard to clothing and apparel is woefully inadequate. Environmental and anti-Frankencrops activism has barely begun to impact the US garment and fashion marketplace, a \$300 billion industry. Unfortunately, just about the same can be said for the campus-based anti-sweatshop movement, despite a decade of activism, including spirited protests against Nike, the Gap, and other brand name bullies. If Americans are what we wear, then we—even rebel youth, trade union members, and progressives—are increasingly corporatized. The fashion statement we’re apparently making with what we wear is that we don’t care. A look at the labels in our clothing or the corporate logos on our shoes reveals that the brand name bullies, the transnational giants in the garment and apparel industry, reign supreme.

Walk into any department store or clothing retailer. Look for a label that says “Union Made in the USA with Organic Cotton (or hemp or wool).” Search through rack after rack, in store after store, but you aren’t likely to find such an item. In fact there are no Union Made and organic clothes or shoes on the market period, with the exception of a new company in Los Angeles called SweatX, <www.sweatx.net> which promises to provide USA Made, Union Made, and organic clothes to the buyers who are demanding them. SweatX’s workers are members of the garment workers union, UNITE. Unfortunately even SweatX’s trade union customers, members of the AFL-CIO, seem unwilling at the present time to take a stand against agricultural sweatshops and pesticides by paying a bit more for organic T-shirts and sweatshirts bearing their union logos. Worse yet, a number of national environmental groups are peddling non-organic merchandise made in China, emblazoned with their logos.

Incredibly, it is not even possible to purchase hemp clothing made from fiber grown in the USA. In a continuing fit of Drug War

insanity, the US government still prohibits the growing of industrial hemp by American farmers, forcing US hemp clothiers to import hemp from abroad.

There are, however, a growing number of clothing companies, mainly smaller ones, which offer non-sweatshop and organic clothing. These companies include: Patagonia, Gaiam, Maggie's Organics, Mountain Equipment Co-op, Hempy's, Globalwear, and over a hundred others. See www.organicconsumers.org/organiccotton/html for a partial list of these companies. Unfortunately, most US consumers, even organic consumers, have never heard of these socially and environmentally responsible clothing companies.

FAQs: Do We Care What We Wear?

Do unions (except for the United Farmworkers Union) simply not care about toxic pesticides, genetically engineered cotton, or the literal "sweatshops in the fields" which characterize most cotton farms and plantations around the world? Don't environmental, church, and social justice groups see a contradiction in putting their logo on pesticide-drenched or genetically engineered cotton items made in sweatshops? Do most green or natural fiber clothing and fabric companies feel that "bottom line" considerations make it impossible to deal with unions or to put a priority on producing garments in the USA? Are anti-sweatshop campaigners aware that millions of cotton workers are poisoned in the fields and that millions of acres of genetically engineered Bt cotton are literally destroying the ability of ecological farmers to grow cotton organically? Do the trade union and anti-sweatshop movements care if small and medium-sized cotton farmers are swindled by large corporations who pay them next to nothing for their crops?

Has the anti-genetic engineering movement forgotten about Bt and Roundup Ready cotton, the fastest growing Frankencrop in the world? Have food activists glossed over the fact that 60% of the cotton harvest by weight goes into the food chain, in the form of cotton seed for dairy cattle and cottonseed oil in salad dressings, baked goods, and snack foods? And most important of all, do North America's 50 million socially and environmentally conscious consumers (Cultural Creatives) care what we wear?

King Cotton: Poisoning the Earth and Water

Cotton is literally the most toxic crop on the planet. While only 3% of the world's farming acreage is cotton, these crops are sprayed with up to 25% of the world's pesticides and herbicides, including some of the most toxic ones, such as aldicarb. And of course cotton is present in many other consumer products besides garments—food products, tampons, bandages, baby diapers, mattresses, bed linen, etc.

"Because of cotton's versatility, it is used for a vast variety of food and fiber products, making it one of the most widely traded commodities. Cotton provides almost 50% of the world's textile needs. Cotton represents an essential component of foreign exchange earnings for more than 55 countries. Yet the simple act of growing and harvesting the one pound of cotton fiber needed to make a T-shirt takes an enormous toll on the air, water, and soil, not to mention the health of people in cotton growing areas... the cotton grown for just one T-shirt requires 1/3 pound of agricultural chemicals." www.sustainablecotton.org

"When all 19 cotton-growing states in the US are tallied, the crop accounts for 25% of all the pesticides used in the U.S. Some of these chemicals are among the most toxic classified by the US Environmental Protection Agency. In developing countries, where regulations are less stringent, the crisis is even more severe." www.sustainablecotton.org

"[The] Most acutely toxic pesticide registered by the E.P.A. [is] aldicarb (used frequently on cotton). In California between 1970 and 1994, [the] amount of total aldicarb used on cotton: 85 to 95%. Number of states in which aldicarb has been detected in the groundwater: 16. Percentage of all US counties containing groundwater susceptible to contamination from agricultural pesticides and fertilizers: 46%. Number of people in the US routinely drinking water contaminated with carcinogenic herbicides: 14 million. Percentage of municipal water treatment facilities lacking equipment to remove these chemicals from the drinking water: 90%. Estimated total costs for US groundwater monitoring: US \$900 million to 2.2 billion. Estimated costs for US groundwater carbon filtration cleanup: up to \$25 million per site." www.sustainablecotton.org

Toxic Cotton: You're Eating It

Few people realize that 60% of a cotton crop, by weight, enters the food chain in the form of cottonseed oil which is used widely in processed foods, and as cottonseed feed for cows, ending up in meat and dairy products. Cotton is comprised of fiber and seed: 40% fiber to 60% seed by weight. Once separated in the gin, the fibers go to textile mills, while the seed and various ginning by-products often find their way untreated into the feed of dairy and beef cattle. The pesticide residues from these cottonseeds concentrate in the fatty tissues of these animals, and in turn are passed on in meat and dairy products to consumers. Cottonseed, which is rich in oil and high in protein, is also a common ingredient in cookies, potato chips, salad dressings, baked goods, and other processed foods.

Genetically Engineered "Frankencotton"

On top of these destructive environmental and health impacts, cotton production is increasingly genetically engineered. Playing on concerns about the fatal harvest of pesticides, Monsanto has pushed genetically engineered cottonseeds onto the market in more than a half-dozen countries as the "green alternative" for cotton growers. In terms of human health hazards, herbicide-resistant or Bt-spliced genetically engineered cotton plants—and their oil and seed derivatives—contain foreign proteins, bacteria, viral promoters, and antibiotic resistant genes—food ingredients that humans have never eaten before. These GE plants and their derivatives are completely unlabeled and untested in regard to their hazards for human health and the environment. Over 10 million acres of genetically engineered cotton are now being grown across the US. These cotton plants are gene-spliced with a soil bacteria called Bt so that the cotton plant emits its own pesticide, or else the plant is genetically engineered to be able to survive mega-doses of powerful toxic pesticides like Monsanto's glyphosate or Aventis' bromoxynil.

While the acreage devoted to genetically engineered crops such as corn, soybeans, and rapeseed (canola) has started leveling off in the US and across the world—due to the growing global opposition to genetic engineering—the acreage of genetically engineered cotton is increasing. These vast mutant fields of

genetically engineered cotton already account for more than 60% of all US cotton, posing comparable hazards to human health and the environment as conventional cotton, while constituting a major threat to organic agriculture as well.

Although fewer pesticides are being sprayed on Bt cotton to control pests like bollworms and budworms, even more toxic pesticides than before are being sprayed to control pests like aphids and stink bugs that seem to thrive once their bollworm or budworm competitors decline. Even worse, Bt cotton is a mortal threat to organic cotton farming, the real “no pesticide” alternative. This threat is two-fold. First of all Bt cotton is a source of genetic pollution (like GE corn or canola), spreading its altered DNA to native cotton varieties and organic fields. Even worse, Bt cotton is slowly but steadily building up resistance among cotton pests, creating the preconditions for cotton superpests to arise that will be resistant to non-GE Bt spray, the most important biological pest control tool for organic farmers.

Business As Usual in the Clothing Industry

In the absence of widespread public awareness and marketplace pressure, corporate agribusiness, Monsanto, and transnational clothing companies can be expected to carry on with business as usual. Levi-Strauss, once held up as being the most pro-worker and socially responsible of the large garment companies, the largest cotton buyer in the world, continues to buy only pesticide drenched and genetically engineered cotton, and has recently announced that they will be following the lead of other US brand name bullies and moving all their production overseas to low-wage areas. The Gap, despite years of protests by anti-sweatshop activists, buys GE cotton, pesticide cotton, and relies upon a notorious network of sweatshop sub-contractors. Companies like Ralph Lauren and Wal-Mart drape themselves in the flag, while selling non-Union, non-USA made clothing produced in overseas sweatshops. Finally Nike, one of leaders of the pack, in terms of sweatshop production, is held up by many in the organic industry as a shining light—for greenwashing themselves by blending 6% organic cotton into its clothes. Sweatshop Nike has now become the largest buyer of organic cotton in the world.

Underlying America's lack of “clothes consciousness” is a multi-billion dollar advertising and fashion industry. This industry deliberately avoids all mention of the ecological and social impacts of our clothing purchases—while relentlessly delivering the same spiritually deadening message and images: clothes make the man and the woman. The style and cut of what you're wearing is more important than who you are inside. In other words worry about what you look like, not what your clothing purchase is doing to the Earth, to cotton plantation workers, to exploited women and children in garment sweatshops.

Brand Name Sweatshops: Free Trade's Fashion Statement

“Sweatshop apparel, clothing and shoes produced in the global South under sub-standard labor and environmental conditions, is so all-pervasive as to be almost invisible. The availability of cheap, almost throwaway clothes that change with each fashion season has become deeply embedded in the culture of advanced industrial nations. A United Nations study in 1997 found that in 80% of developing countries, manufacturing wages are now lower than they were in the 1970s and early 80s. Hourly wages

paid by clothing giants such as Wal-Mart, Ralph Lauren, Ann Taylor, Esprit, Liz Claiborne, Kmart, Nike, Adidas, J.C. Penney and others in China's “special economic zones,” are as low as 13 cents an hour—and all of them are paying well below the estimated 87 cents an hour minimum living wage for an assembly-line worker in China.” *Naomi Klein, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies (1999)*

Even expensive designer clothing lines are now commonly produced by shadowy sub-contractors in developing countries. Workers toil overtime for a dollar to three dollars a day to produce garments or shoes that will sell for many times more in the industrialized North. Since it's now considered “too expensive” both to pay a living wage and protect the environment, US, European, and Japanese textile and clothing manufacturers, have, for the most part, closed down production and moved to “outsource” their production overseas, preferably in the lowest-wage countries like Viet-Nam or China. North American unions have either been unable or unwilling to stop these runaway shops from relocating outside the US and undermining the domestic textile and garment industry.

As Klein points out, companies previously satisfied with a 100% profit margin from factory to retail, now demand at least 400%. Since women and children are the easiest to exploit, they are the preferred workers in these sweatshops. Rights of free speech, free association, and the right to form a trade union are routinely repressed. Water pollution, air pollution, social dislocation, economic exploitation—these are merely the “externalities” of the global marketplace and free trade. The occasional bad publicity surrounding brand name sweatshops—whether it accrues to Nike, Adidas, or Wal-Mart's Kathy Lee Gifford sports clothes line, are managed by public relations firms and “solved” by temporarily shifting contracts and operations to yet another maquiladora (sweatshop assembly plant) or export zone.

Without a real marketplace alternative that is both green and socially responsible, when pressure builds up on Nike, for example, Adidas simply makes more money off their sweatshop sneakers, and vice-versa. Textile and garment worker unions in the industrial North, once at the forefront of organizing the unorganized, seem to be asleep at the wheel.

Organic and Fair Made Fibers: Moving Beyond the Niche Market

“Almost unheard of just a few years ago, apparel and other items made from organic fibers can be found at a wide range of retail outlets including stores, catalogues, and the Internet. Well-known international clothing manufacturers and small businesses, for instance, are incorporating organic cotton into their apparel. In addition, organic cotton appears in a variety of personal hygiene products, home furnishings and more. Organic fibers, which include cotton, wool, hemp, and flax, are grown using a system of farming that builds healthy soils and a healthy environment... [In the US] Organic cotton is currently grown in Arizona, Arkansas, California, Missouri, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Texas.” *Press Release put out by the Organic Trade Association (Jan. 7, 2000)*

International agribusiness, the biotechnology industry, and leading clothing companies appear quite willing to tolerate an organic food and clothing sector, based upon Fair Trade and

sustainable production practices, as long as it remains nothing more than a small, niche market. Nike, for example has no problem spending a bit more to blend organic cotton into its clothing, as long as it can disarm its critics and greenwash over its major profit center, sweatshops.

If organic products threaten to break out of this niche market, as organic food already has begun to do in Europe, Japan, and North America, then transnational corporations will attempt to buy into strategic sectors of the industry and make certain that the “organic alternative” stays under their control. But as long as this Organic/Fair Made niche market is low volume and mainly restricted to the upper middle class, as long as it doesn’t affect “business as usual” and sweatshop super profits—whether in the field or the factory—the cotton giants and the brand name bullies will never change their bottom line, nor their business practices.

And yet the survival of the planet and the well being of the global body politic demand a rupture in “business as usual.” Industrial, chemical-intensive agriculture—exemplified most negatively by factory farm-style cotton production—now supercharged with the advent of genetic engineering, poses a clear and present danger to the environment, human health, and the survival of the world’s 2.4 billion family farmers and rural villagers. The globalization and industrialization of food, fiber, and clothing, part of the takeover of civil society and culture by transnational corporations, is a major link in a chain of events that have brought the world to the brink of disaster. Climate change, environmental destruction, ozone depletion, species extinction, mass hunger, mass poverty, nuclear proliferation, endless war, drug addiction, political disenfranchisement, institutionalization of sweatshop production, and a rampant out-of-control consumerism—these are but the various symptoms of a sickness that must be addressed now.

The time is at hand to build upon the widespread pro-environment, anti-genetic engineering, and anti-sweatshop consciousness which already exists and create mass consumer demand for organic, non-sweatshop, and Fair Made clothing and other products.

Clothes for a Change: Care What You Wear

OCA is launching a new public education and marketplace pressure campaign this fall to raise awareness about the negative social and environmental effects of conventional and biotech cotton production and the institutionalized exploitation of clothing sweatshops. While OCA and our allies pressure the brand name bullies, we will highlight the Organic and Fair Made alternatives already on the marketplace. Our basic plan is to unite organic consumers, anti-genetic engineering activists, trade unionists, church social justice advocates, progressives in the fashion and garment industry, and the Fair Trade anti-sweatshop community into a potent force for fundamental change, both in the marketplace and in the realm of politics and public policy. This will be a long-term campaign, similar to the ongoing and successful anti-GE, pro-organic, Fair Trade campaign that the OCA has been waging against Starbucks over the past 18 months—except that Clothes for a Change will be even larger.

This new Clothes for a Change Coalition will demand that major clothing retailers and manufacturers such as the Gap, Nike, Ralph Lauren, Levi-Strauss, and Wal-Mart:

- * Stop buying and selling clothes that contain genetically engineered cotton.
- * Start blending in organic and other sustainable fibers such as hemp in their clothing.
- * Stop using sweatshop labor.
- * Guarantee that they meet independently verified Fair Trade (non-sweatshop) standards as outlined by the United Nations International Labor Organization.
- * Sell Union Made and US Made organic clothing whenever possible.

Fifteen years ago organic food in the USA was a tiny niche market. Now it’s an \$11 billion a year industry, the fastest growing segment of the American food system. Similarly, organic and Union or Fair Made clothing constitutes a tiny niche market today, but with your support we can meet our long term goal of having at least 30% of all clothing in the US be Organic and Fair Made by the year 2010.

The OCA intends to meet these goals by:

- * Getting the public interest community (environmental groups, labor unions, churches) to “walk our talk” and stop promoting or selling T-shirts and other items with our logos unless they are Organic and Union Made, or at least certified as non-sweatshop under internationally recognized standards.
- * Distributing thousands of fact sheets and leaflets to educate consumers about these issues.
- * Generating thousands of faxes, emails and phone calls to clothing companies.
- * Getting the Organic & Fair Made message out through the media.
- * Organizing hundreds of leafleting events and protests outside of stores such as The Gap, Nike, Ralph Lauren, and Levi’s. Encouraging consumers to return past clothing purchases to these companies.
- * Organizing school districts, city councils, and universities to begin purchasing only organic and Fair Made clothing and fibers, with special preference for Union Made and Made in the USA garments.

The first step in this process is for the progressive community and socially responsible consumers to start walking our talk. It’s fine to buy used or recycled clothes, in fact you’re usually supporting local businesses or charities by buying second-hand clothing. But whenever you go to buy new clothes or shoes, make sure it’s Organic or sustainable and Fair Made, non-sweatshop. We are what we wear, as well as what we eat, and it’s time for a change.

If you would like to volunteer in your local community or on your campus in the OCA Clothes for a Change campaign send an email to chris@organicconsumers.org.

In the meantime stay tuned to BioDemocracy News and our website www.organicconsumers.org for the latest news, analysis, and action alerts.