

Introduction

The Clean Clothes Campaign office is established in a former school building in Amsterdam. Visitors pass through a corridor lined with publications in several languages to find a cluster of rooms full of people who peer at computer screens, tap keyboards, dig into stacks of paper, confer in groups around tables, or shout into a telephone in the hope of being understood in an office on the other side of the world. Most of them are women. The atmosphere is informal and easy-going, but there is always a sense of urgency in the air.

This office is the nerve centre of a network that communicates with corporate directors in London and migrant workers in China's Pearl River Delta, and that connects shopping teenagers in Stockholm to home-workers in Delhi, fashion designers in Warsaw to seamstresses in Madagascar, housewives in Madrid to union leaders in Sri Lanka. It is a 'system of information, protest and planning, a system already coursing with activity and ideas crossing many national borders and several generations', as Naomi Klein puts it in the introduction to *No Logo*, her book that describes the birth of a movement that fights the adverse effects of globalisation.¹ The Clean Clothes Campaign is part of this movement and, after 20 years of protest and planning, it is no longer in its infancy.

The campaign got off the ground on 29 September 1988, when 50 women picketed in front of a C&A clothes store in Amsterdam. They were members of feminist groups, Third World solidarity groups, squatting communities and consumer organisations. They were angry because they had discovered that the clothes they wore had been made in sweatshops – places where people at the wrong end of economic development work long hours for little pay, under harsh conditions.

Their action was one in a long line of protest dating back to the nineteenth century. Around 1850 Charles Kingsley, a British Christian Socialist, wrote the pamphlet *Cheap Clothes and Nasty*, a diatribe against the 'sweating system' in London's clothing trade of the time. Its most amazing feature is that so many of the characteristics it describes still apply to the sweatshops of today.²

At the time, the production of ready-made, mass-produced garments was underway. In London's West and East Ends,

And Esther de Haan commented:

We modelled the organisation on the anti-apartheid campaign that put pressure on Shell to withdraw from South Africa: a neat campaign with a broad support base, targeting one company, and with a coalition structure. While the participating groups formed a legal body, the campaign as such was collective property, open to everybody. It was a common model in those days. It built upon the notion that everybody has the right to fight abuses, without first having to secure the approval of a *politburo*. It had the added advantage of safeguarding the organisation from the legal consequences of radical action.²⁸

Although the FNV, the largest Dutch trade union federation, participated in discussions and campaigns, it did not join the coalition at that time.

The FNV has always been supportive, especially on a practical level. A union is of course not an action group, and vice versa; we had to get used to one another. It took time to establish our relative positions. Now trade unions are active in CCC campaigns in European and developing countries, either as a member of a CCC coalition or cooperating to achieve a common goal.²⁹

C&A, the company the CCC had decided to focus on, was the Dutch market leader, with a 20 per cent share. A national magazine described C&A as thoroughly anti-union, both in its supply line and in its own stores. Its buying practices were reported to be tough, with buyers receiving military-style training.³⁰ The CCC organised a national day of protest against C&A's buying practices. In eleven cities, including one in Belgium, C&A stores were picketed. Some demonstrations were small; some went all-out with fashion shows, fire-eaters and street orchestras. 'Clean clothes' seemed to strike a nerve. The campaign, so the organisers thought, provided people with a practical way to express solidarity with women and labour organisations in the South, while challenging the power of the multinationals of the western world.

C&A was worried. It threatened to sue the authors of *The Quiet Giant*, and did in fact sue a consumer organisation that had printed the findings from the book. The dispute was settled in court.³¹ Proposed negotiations foundered on C&A's demand that all talks should remain unpublished. The CCC argued that informing

2 Destination Elsewhere

In the middle of the 1990s, the pace of relocation of the western garment industry to low-wage countries in the Third World accelerated. Small garment producers were losing ground to large ones. The large ones increasingly disposed of their manufacturing facilities and relocated production overseas, keeping only the most complicated and fashion-sensitive parts of production ‘at home’ and concentrating on the most profitable pursuits of design, marketing and sales. They turned into ‘merchandisers’ or ‘brands’, seemingly freed from the material world of sewing machines and stitching workers.¹ Small retailers formed buying combinations that gradually developed the same structure and activities as large retailers. Mergers and takeovers among brands increased the power of buyers over producers. To keep sales rising, companies began to bring out several collections per year. The secret of the rise of H&M – the Swedish retail chain that in the 1990s conquered the European market – was the combination of an extremely frequent change in collections with a large turnover. Its buying power enabled the company to negotiate low production prices and sell fashionable clothes cheaply.²

The primary reasons for relocation are the availability of cheap labour and the absence of workers’ organisations in the countries relocated to. An extra advantage is risk avoidance, through shifting the burden of managing and maintaining a labour force in a volatile market – characterised by seasonal and fashion-induced waves – onto the shoulders of producers in developing countries. While these producers and their subcontractors compete for orders and drive each other and their workers to the edge, the brands and large retailers don’t have to worry about the needs of the labour force and are free to focus on what they are really good at: selling.

Relocation is facilitated by modern information technology and transportation. Governments in developing countries, eager to attract investment, contribute through favourable tax measures, negation of labour rights and suppression of unions. When the Sri Lankan multinational Tri-Star Apparel showed interest producing in Uganda at the beginning of the millennium, the government welcomed it

3 Asia

BANGLADESH: A LETHAL INDUSTRY

Market Darwinism is a term some critics use to describe the mechanisms of the globalising garment industry. But while the ‘race to the bottom’ resembles the competition of species in more ways than one, there is a fundamental difference: in the garment sector, it is not the fittest that survive, but those exercising the bitterest forms of worker exploitation. That, at least, is how it looks in Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshi garment industry experienced explosive growth in the 1990s. The country had an advantage over competitors whose exports were restricted by Multi-Fibre Arrangement quota. Not surprisingly, it awaited the MFA phase-out in 2004 with some anxiety. Against all predictions, the industry continued to grow. But the way in which it did brings to mind images of the First World War, which saw wave upon wave of soldiers sent to the battlefield – every new platoon more desperate than the one it was to replace. The Bangladeshi garment industry is fed by never-ending waves of slum-dwellers, brought up on a diet of poverty and illiteracy in one of the most densely populated countries on earth. In Bangladesh, 45 per cent of people live below the poverty line; the adult literacy rate stands at 41 per cent.¹

Even when the 2004 phasing-out of the quota system brought Bangladesh into competition with China, the industry kept growing. But this was not because it was innovative and dynamic – the industry suffered from defective infrastructure and underinvestment – but because, as the German internet magazine *Spiegel Online* pointed out, even China cannot undercut hourly wages of between 5 and 10 US dollar cents.²

In 2006, after an outburst of protests in which factories were torched and workers took to the streets, and under pressure from the international brands, the government raised the minimum monthly wage in the garment industry to Taka 1,662.50 or 20 euros. It was the first raise since 1994, and the new wage was still not even close to meeting the basic needs of a worker’s family. In

5 Europe's Neighbours

THE SWEATSHOP FINDS NEW TERRITORIES

Asian and African countries were not the only ports of destination for the flight of the European clothing industry at the end of the twentieth century. Close by, there were other countries with attractive production regimes, and they had the added advantage of short delivery times, well-developed infrastructure and an educated labour force.

The fall of communism in 1989 had caused unprecedented economic earthquakes in central and eastern Europe. Bettina Musiolek, living in the former East Germany and a member of the German CCC, describes what happened to the textiles and garment industry in her country:

The markets in Russia and other eastern European countries disappeared overnight. Partly because poverty was on the rise; partly because everybody with a little money now bought the western clothes they had longed for, which were dirt cheap to boot. Everybody started ordering from the catalogue of Otto, the West German mail-order company. To be able to compete, the East German factories had to adapt to a higher and more intensive pace of work, and produce many different collections per year. They needed a whole new marketing system and network, and had to use the West German currency, of which they possessed very little. They also had to adopt the cheapskate strategies of western companies: informalisation of work, the use of short-term contracts and home-work, and outsourcing to low-wage countries. Of course they didn't succeed. Between 1989 and 1991, employment in [the textiles and garment industry] was reduced by half; 140,000 workers lost their job. In 2008, production has vanished altogether. I think that, in East Germany between 1989 and 1992, we saw the biggest industrial collapse in history.¹

In the midst of industrial collapse, the export-oriented textiles and garment sector in other eastern European countries gained in

Interlude: The European Network Up-Close

The profiles presented here have been distilled from face-to-face interviews, held in the course of 2008 with the coordinators of all European CCCs and a few long-time campaigners. Their thoughts and views add flavour to the more abstract processes of organisation described in this book. To facilitate reading, the profiles have all been cast in the same mould, to the effect that each one is focussed on five themes: the network; successes; distinctive approach; room for improvement; and personal motivation.

MALIN ERIKSSON (24), RENA KLÄDER, CCC SWEDEN

The Network

‘One of the great things about a network is that you can have planning and anarchism side by side. We want to attract young people. They want to do practical stuff without paperwork or planning a year ahead, actions that are easy to take part in even for newcomers. At the office we do of course make plans, but we present them as a framework, not as a limitation, so they can use their imagination and just go ahead and do it.

‘In 2006 we had a first meeting of NGOs and trade unions in neighbouring countries engaged in activities similar to ours. Now there is a Norwegian and a Danish CCC, and we have regular Nordic consultations that are very useful, because we partly deal with the same companies and the same culture.

‘I support the idea that we should act locally while thinking globally, and an international network fits this strategy. It is also difficult. As a coordinator I sometimes feel vulnerable, because my colleague coordinators work abroad.’

Successes

‘Our campaign on ethical public procurement began in 2006. It started out with research into supply chains in India and Pakistan that found child labour and labour rights violations that surprised even us. We launched the campaign ‘My tax money’ – we Swedes

‘strategic appeals’ to bundle women’s problems in the workplace and present them more forcefully.³²

And Ascoly comments:

Worker empowerment is at the heart of our mission, and these workers are mainly women. I can barely think of anything more radical or controversial than supporting women’s empowerment. The gendered aspect of the rights violations epidemic in the garment sector needs all the attention it can get. Companies are obviously in need of awareness-raising on this issue. We must also prioritise it in our communication with the public and with partners. Sustainable worker organising must be gender-aware; a model of trade union organising that is male-dominated and sexist has no future. We need to put more effort into articulating the steps forward, in a very concrete way.³³

TRADE UNIONS AND NGOs

In an essay titled, ‘Who built the South Korean economic miracle and who are its victims?’, labour rights activist Cha Mi Kyung describes the history of garment production in her country as a fast-forwarding film. Garment production propelled South Korean industrialisation in the 1960s and 1970s – firstly on the fuel of foreign capital, but soon also Korean-owned. Severe exploitation of labour led to protests – a young garment worker set himself publicly on fire with a copy of the Labour Law in his hands – and to the birth of strong unions and rising wages. In the early 1990s production was relocated, and while Koreans lost their jobs, exploitation was exported to low-wage countries. The strong unions were helpless ‘because there is not yet a long-term strategy of international solidarity on labour problems, no strategy of the workers’ movement in the context of globalisation’.³⁴

Irene Xavier, working in Malaysia for TIE Asia, an NGO working with unions and shop stewards, says:

Traditionally, unions have a national perspective, they are protective of their own labour force. With migrant workers, the initial call of unions has always been: ‘Get rid of them, they are stealing our jobs.’ The same is happening with contract workers. This mindset interferes with international solidarity.³⁵

8 Consumers

‘Where can I buy clean clothes?’

It is always the first question consumers ask when they are confronted with images of sweatshops and information about starvation wages and exhaustive working days in the garment industry. No wonder: when anti-sweatshop campaigns approach them as shoppers, they will ask questions about buying. No wonder, either, that they are confused when the CCC tells them that there are no clean clothes to be bought because, unlike coffee or bananas, clothes are not yet decently and sustainably produced in quantity. From there, the message becomes even more complicated, and it is amazing that clothes campaigns can be successful at all, dealing as they do with fun themes like production chains, multi-stakeholder initiatives and trade relations; denying the dazed consumers the gratification of a feel-good, cool and conscious brand, and asking them instead to pester retail and brand company management with questions about the origin of their merchandise.

Nevertheless, the efforts of the network to mobilise consumers are considered necessary and successful – by activists themselves, by governments and civil society that support the network financially, and not least by the brands and retail companies targeted. They find the links between themselves and the workers in supplying factories – so effectively blurred in the process of globalisation – laid bare by campaigns that use the internet, research reports, rallies, and other types of mass communication. In the words of one group of anti-sweatshop campaigners: ‘globalisation enables manufacturers to shift their production sites to avoid militant workers, but they cannot so easily avoid militant consumers’.¹ Consumer pressure has proved to be a powerful weapon. Still, public interest in buying ‘clean clothes’ persists, and it is always difficult to answer this specific question without losing the public’s interest and engagement.

FAIR TRADE

A well-known strategy that appeals to ‘ethical consumers’ is fair trade. Initiated in the field of agricultural products like coffee and