

Jeans, the human cost of a fashion icon

Silicosis is an incurable – but preventable – occupational disease. And yet people across the world are still dying of it. In Turkey, 40 jeans industry workers have died of silicosis in recent years alone. In April 2009, a ministerial instruction finally banned the hand sanding of jeans in response to pressure from a joint committee of workers, unions, doctors and civil society organizations. But Turkish manufacturers are already outsourcing these activities elsewhere.

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Work can kill, as workers well know. And not just the long-recognized high-risk jobs like the building trades. Other jobs, where the risks are less obvious, are just as health-damaging. Jeans manufacture is a textbook case. Some years ago, a team of researchers and doctors from the Atatürk University in Erzurum (north-eastern Turkey) found a link between jeans manufacture and silicosis, one of the worst respiratory tract diseases.

Around five billion pairs of jeans are made throughout the world each year. Not only are jeans among the best-known and popular items of clothing, but the fabric itself has a long tradition and a celebrated history, beginning in the Italian town of Genoa several centuries ago, when port workers adopted it for work clothing because of its resistance. It was only in the 1950s that it began to sweep through lifestyles and mass culture to become a global cultural icon.

One of the trendiest fashions in jeans is faded denim, with its characteristic look half-way between old and vintage, bordering on worn-through. Many youngsters in the 1960s used bleach to get that effect. As faded denim gradually became the “must have” look, jeans manufacturers channelled the fashion, adapting to capture the new market. They rapidly developed an industrial-scale production process to produce these kinds of jeans in the millions. A huge business volume generated by the simplest of processes. Blasting stones with compressed air jets produces a very fine sand whose abrasive and erosive effect both softens the denim and lightens its original deep colour.

It is an operation that is extremely damaging to the health of the worker who

performs it; all throughout the treatment, he will be continuously breathing in minute dust particles that cause severe diseases of the airways. A combination of factors adds to the danger of this activity and the speed with which it harms workers' health: permanent exposure to dust, cramped treatment rooms, long working hours, and in many cases completely unhygienic workshops with no form of health protection. On top of that, the sand-blasting rooms are rarely ventilated because the employers' aim in all circumstances is to avoid the dispersion of dust which might push up their costs.

Silicosis in five years

One of the worst diseases caused by breathing in silica, granite, sand and stone dust is silicosis. Although one of the oldest occupational diseases, it is still – as current knowledge stands – incurable. Once contracted, it continues to exert its irreversible effects until death. The European Union banned these manufacturing processes over 40 years ago specifically because of this high level of risk. European companies, reluctant to forego the vast revenue involved, chose to switch production to as-yet unregulated regions, which is why since the early 2000s, production has been relocated to countries like Turkey, Syria, Bangladesh, Mexico, India and Indonesia, moving on thereafter to Southeast Asia and North Africa.

Until very recently, silicosis was mainly found in miners, building and excavation workers, and foundry and ceramics industry workers, generally surfacing after 20-30 years of work. More recently, however, the

disease has also started surfacing in other lines of work, like certain dentistry occupations and the clothing industry.

The first two recorded cases in Turkey's jeans industry were diagnosed in 2005 – two non-smoker labourers aged 18 and 19 who had been working in the sector since 2000. Unlike previously recorded cases of silicosis, the disease was contracted in less than five years. The contemporaneous medical report noted, “the first [case] presented with a history of dry cough, dizzy spells and weight loss over a period of three months. The second had suffered from shortness of breath for four years. They were aged only 13 and 14 when they started doing this job for eleven hours a day in the same small workshop with no window or ventilation and with only a basic face mask for protection. The younger died a day after diagnosis (...); for the other, the prescribed treatment did nothing to ease his breathing”.

The clothing – and especially the jeans – industry is a major contributor to Turkey's economy. It has seen a big expansion since the end of the 1970s, with an explosive growth of workshops up and down the country in the past decade. In 2008, Turkey was the third biggest world exporter of jeans, with sales of US\$2.3 billion. More than 300 000 people are thought to work in the sector.

Young people from rural areas and neighbouring countries drawn by the hope of finding jobs and a better life flock in their thousands in a steady stream to the outer suburbs of Istanbul, Ankara and other big towns. They want to earn money and are willing to put up with very harsh working conditions

Business owners are keen to profit from this labour supply in return for monthly pay of 500-900 Turkish pounds (230-400 euros). Production operations require few facilities and little machinery. Workers are crowded into cramped, enclosed spaces without ventilation so as to minimise sand loss. It matters little that the excess dust ends up deposited deep in the pulmonary alveoli (air cells) of the hapless sandblasting workers, who are often young immigrants, some even children, from inland Turkey or Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Georgia or Azerbaijan.

From 10 000 to 15 000 workers concerned

Forty jeans manufacturing workers have died of silicosis in Turkey in recent years. In April 2009, a Ministry of Labour and Social Security instruction finally banned the hand sanding of jeans and any other clothing with the stated aim of preventing the development and spread of silicosis. At the same time, the government announced that sixty-odd illegal workshops would be shut down, enforcement improved, and pension rights guaranteed for the workers concerned.

The announcement of the ban was greeted with howls of conspiracy from Turkish firms, many of which began to outsource their production to Chinese, Indian, Egyptian and Bangladeshi firms.

The same result as that obtained by hand sanding of fabrics can be achieved with heavy-duty industrial equipment - but at a higher cost. Which is why firms prefer to shift the risks onto weaker and less well-protected workers. In a globalised economy, and where there are no binding international labour standards, the profit motive easily wins out over ethical considerations.

No-one questions the importance of the ban introduced by the Turkish government.

But it alone cannot eradicate the problem of illegal workshops and their reality shaped by a culture of exploitation and trampling on the most elementary rights.

The government's decision is the culmination of pressure exerted by a committee set up by the workers concerned with the support of scientific and nongovernmental organizations, universities and trade unions. The committee is working to get the Turkish authorities to accept their share of responsibility. Between 10 000 and 15 000 people are believed to work in Turkey's denim industry. Many have contracted silicosis. The committee has emphasised the responsibilities of multinationals, SMEs and big fashion industry names that cynically turn a blind eye to the reality of the subcontracting industries, and has drawn up a list of specific national and international demands. Specifically, it wants this type of work to be outlawed worldwide, and for International Labour Organization and the World Health Organization safety and health at work regulations and resolutions to be complied with. It also wants the govern-

ment to pay for tests, diagnosis and treatment of the disease contracted by workers, whether Turkish nationals, legal or illegal immigrants. It is calling for a tripartite commission of the relevant ministries and social partners to be set up as a matter of urgency to help workers in dealing with officialdom. And it wants public authorities that have failed to carry out the necessary inspections and not performed their duties to be brought to justice.

The European and International, Textile, Garment & Leather Workers' Federations are actively supporting the Turkish trade unions' campaign to protect workers' health. They are running a trade union workplace information and training programme in the worst-affected regions. They have also petitioned the health ministers of immigrant workers' countries of origin for help through providing screening tests and appropriate healthcare. They are also encouraging prevention programmes and calling for a guaranteed healthy and safe working environment in all countries. Because not a single worker more should be killed for the sake of jeans. ●

Multinationals, SMEs and big fashion industry names cynically turn a blind eye to the reality of the subcontracting industries.



Hand sandblasting was developed in Turkey in the 1990s as a more effective alternative to chemical fading - which gives a too-uniform effect - and cheaper than recent laser technology.
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