

LABOUR

Labour Market Flexibility > Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor, MIT

One of the features of contemporary economic systems is what's called imposing flexibility in labour markets. That's considered a wonderful thing. Labour markets are supposed to be flexible. It's a fancy way of saying you don't know when you go to sleep at night whether you have a job tomorrow morning. And that contributes to efficiency. Anybody who's taken an economics course understands that you get more efficiency if people have no security. They don't know what's going to happen to them tomorrow. And then you can move them around, it's just like a tool.

So if you can get labour market flexibility then you get a kind of efficiency. But of course at a cost. For example one of the costs is mental illness. The International Labour Organization just did a study in which they found that the incidents of mental illness among workers has increased very sharply. Which they attribute plausibly to working in, workers insecurity.

On the other hand you can look at this as a game. So like when Allan Greenspan at the Federal Reserve tells Congress about what a wonderful economy he's running now he attributes a good part of it to what he calls growing worker insecurity because then people can't ask for, they're afraid to ask for better wages, or more benefits. And profits go up and inflation stays down and you get a fairy tale economy except for the population but they're tools. They're tools of production and units of consumption. So they're doing their job if that's what they do.

Worker Rights, Yeah Right > Charles Kernaghan, Director, National Labor Committee

Technically, the definition of a sweatshop is violation of wage and hour laws. But that doesn't put the human face on it. So when you're talking about sweatshops in a place like Bangladesh, for example, you're talking about young women, 16 to 25 years of age, locked in factories behind barbed wire with armed guards. You're talking about people working from 8:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night, 7 days a week, 30 days a month, for wages of about 8 to 18 cents an hour. And if those women try to defend their rights they're immediately cut down and fired and blacklisted. And it gets even worse.

These women, they come in when they're like 16. They work to about 25 at which point they're fired because they're used up. They're worn out. Their lives are already over. And the company has replaced them with another crop of young girls. So I mean, when you really put a face on the sweatshop issue, that's

what it's like. And living conditions, we've been to the homes of young women who made our clothing in Bangladesh and Honduras, but I'll use the example of Bangladesh, - young women who make our clothing. And we went to a woman's house, she had just worked 120 hours that week. In fact, in the last three days she'd worked 64 hours. All night shifts three days in a row.

You go to her house and she lived in a dirt floor, 8 by 10 foot hut made out of thatch and cardboard. And there was a dirt floor. Four people lived in that little tiny hut, about 8 by 10. There was one bed right in the dirt. There was one wardrobe right in the dirt. And she told us that when it rains they piled up dirt around the edge of the hut because sewage races through their house when it rains. Then she said at night when it rains you have to sit up all night under an umbrella because there's no dry spot in the house. Now, this woman makes our clothing. She's working 120 hours a week. And yet she lives in these conditions of utter, utter misery.

Worker Rights Vs. Copyrights > Elaine Bernard, Executive Director, Trade Union Program, Harvard

Let me give you an example from the World Trade Organization. The World Trade Organization says it can do nothing about child labour. It can do nothing about forced prison labour. It can do nothing about labour conditions. That's too difficult, that's not the business its in. And yet let a country start knocking off CDs without paying a corporation copyright and all of a sudden the full power of the world community channeled through the World Trade Organization can come to bear on that country.

Holding Corporations Accountable > Elaine Bernard, Executive Director, Trade Union Program, Harvard

Can we ever be a democratic society when we have privately held wealth that is unaccountable? That is larger today than the gross domestic product of many countries? No country, no democracy can stand up to such tremendous concentrations of wealth. Therefore we need to break them up. We need to make them socially accountable.

And we need to think who can hold them accountable because if it's everybody's job to hold something accountable then nobody does it. Then it doesn't get done. And that's why I keep pointing back to the workers, the employees. They have a real interest in doing so.

State of the Unions > Elaine Bernard, Executive Director, Trade Union Program, Harvard

Well unions have gone through a lot of changes like other social movements. They've gone from being a social movement, you know workers community wide to, with the Cold War becoming what I jokingly called Contracts 'R Us. An institution that basically was concerned with wage benefits and the condition of work very narrowly.

And today I think what we're seeing is unions going back to much more of a social movement. Recognizing that the work place is far too important to narrow it to wages, benefits and conditions of work. That it's a site of decision making that's absolutely essential for a democracy, for workers to have greater power in there. And not just the power of being paid a decent wage. It's a place of decision making where we determine what will be produced. When, where and how?

It's a tremendous site of decision making. And as such unions need to be involved in not just the most narrow of decision making but the whole wealth of decision making in the work place. And that decisions that are made in the work place impact on the entire community. And so what we're seeing is the labour movement recognizing that it is a wider social movement. That there is nothing that can be won at the bargaining table that cannot be taken away politically.

Well that means labour needs to be involved in the political system. And then they run into the power of the corporations and the private concentrations of wealth. So what we're seeing today is that the unions are recognizing that the sort of corporate big business agenda of privatization, deregulation and free trade is not only affecting them as workers. But it's affecting them in the communities where they live in all over.

And so they're starting to link with other social movements that look to advance democracy and justice, social justice. Because what are unions about? Unions are about economic and social justice in the work place.

Joke Jobs > Naomi Klein, Author, No Logo

When I was interviewing the managers of export processing zones in Asia. As well as managers of individual factories. When I would ask them why the wages were so low and what the conditions under which the workers lived were so difficult, they really sort of pooh-pooed the concern. And the way they explained it is that the people who work in these factories are overwhelmingly young, young women between the ages of 18 and 25. And I would hear over and over again that these young women didn't really need the kind of money that could support families.

That these were just temporary jobs. That they were only doing it for a few years so that they could send a little money back to their families who lived in the

country side. And they lived like, it was a sort of dorm room set up, although twelve to a room and so on. Bunk beds, very cramped quarters. These were conditions where one could never raise a family.

And in fact there are horror stories coming out of the zones of workers being routinely fired when their bosses find out that they're pregnant. In the Maquiladoras in Mexico of doing pregnancy, routinely doing pregnancy testing before workers are hired. Doing sanitary pad checks to make sure that nobody is pregnant. And it's an infantilization of the work force that is going on overwhelmingly in the export processing zones. They're sort of engineering a kind of ageless work force where no one has to be responsible for families.

And there is a real parallel with what's going on at the mall even though it's some how obscene to compare the conditions under which teenagers and people in their twenties working at Starbucks and McDonalds and the Gap - those conditions. It's obscene to compare them with the conditions in the export processing zone. But from the perspective of the companies there is an undeniable symmetry at work. Because of course what we hear about the reasons why McDonalds' workers are only making just above the minimum wage. Or Gap workers are only making \$7.00 an hour it's because these aren't real jobs either.

And once again the work force is mostly, mostly women. Mostly ages 18–24. The companies say the exact same thing, that it doesn't, you don't have to support families on these salaries because they're somehow training wheel jobs. Joke jobs and so on. So an amazing thing is happening for a company like the Gap because neither at the retail end nor at the production end does it ever have to take responsibility for the fact that adults with children are having to support themselves on the wages that they pay.

Codes Of Conduct > Naomi Klein, Author, No Logo

When I was in the Philippines I talked to a lot of workers about these codes of conduct that are drafted by companies like Nike and the Gap. And might be regulated by some northern NGO's. This is the trendy new idea. And not only didn't they think it was going to help them but they were furious at the idea that these rules would be imposed on them rather than be rules that they had organized for amongst themselves. Because of course this is about self determination. This is about our right to govern ourselves and to govern our corporations.

And it's the same thing in the developing world. It's about workers' rights to organize themselves and make demands of their employers. These are founding principles of unionism. And it might seem like a short cut to say like, okay well we've got a whole bunch of rules and you just have to sign on to them. But what I'm hearing is that in fact this is the last thing that workers want. What workers want are for rights that they supposedly already have such as the right of to

freedom of association to be enforced. Not to have an entirely privatized legal system imposed upon them.