

Made in USA—but only for the wealthy



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Ever since I became an NALC national officer—which was long before I became a vice president of the AFL-CIO Union Label Department—I’ve advocated that letter carriers patronize union stores and buy union products. And if carriers couldn’t “Buy Union,” I urged them to spend their money on what’s made here in the USA.

The rub, of course, is that for decades, buying union and even buying “Made in the USA” has not been an easy task. In fact, as a new resident officer, I wrote a column lamenting the fact that I couldn’t find a union-made bicycle for my son, then 8.

Reid’s now 23, and he’s changed a lot, but the problem hasn’t—ex-

cept to the degree that it’s gotten worse in the past 15 years. And I say this despite the efforts of the Obama administration and at least some business leaders to keep American plants running on all cylinders and bring back to the U.S. manufacturing that had been “off-shored.” The evidence isn’t overwhelming, but it appears that in many sectors of the economy, some manufacturers are serious about producing goods in this country—and some retailers are committed to selling American-made goods, although not necessarily union-made, sad to say.

But here’s another rub: Many consumers want to buy American-made products, but when they reach for the item and then look at the price tag, they blanche—and grab an alternative made in China. Or Vietnam. Or anywhere but here.

I feel for those manufacturers, especially in the garment industry, who have produced American-made goods but then have to abandon this effort because they can’t sell what they’ve made. A *New York Times* article shortly after Thanksgiving reported on several small garment manufacturers in New York who couldn’t find a market for their low-cost clothing because their labor costs were undercut by manufacturers in developing countries. Now at the high end—selling high fashion to the wealthy—these small New York City companies could compete, but only because shoppers with fat wallets were willing and able to pay more for quality.

Believe it or not, Walmart has made a full-court press to sell American-made products; there is, however, a catch. Because of Walmart’s size and scope, they can *lean* on their American suppliers to charge Walmart less—which is how Walmart keeps the prices of American-made goods reasonably low.

But guess who gets hurt? American workers *produc-*

ing these goods for Walmart. They’re the ones being squeezed.

So here’s the bottom line: Many Americans just don’t earn enough to buy American-made products, unless they’re made through a Walmartian exploitive system.

Why? In large part because the middle class that became a powerful engine of economic growth in the post-World War II period, a middle class created and sustained by a strong, vital labor movement, has, for the most part, disappeared.

Look around your town or the next one over. Remember when the factories were humming all day long—all night, too? When union workers made stuff, and were paid a fair wage for a fair day’s pay, and then went out and bought stuff that the guy or gal down the street made?

Those days are gone. Today not only are the rich getting richer, and the poor getting poorer, but those in between—a shrinking part of the population—are also getting poorer.

Which is why those New York garment manufacturers can’t sell reasonably priced clothes that are made right here, in the U.S. of A. It’s also why high-end stores like Nordstrom and stores like Dollar Tree that cater to the struggling working class are prospering, while Sears and J.C. Penney are struggling and Loehmann’s just went belly-up. Ditto for restaurants, where many middle-class diners just don’t have the money to trot off to Red Lobster or Olive Garden on the weekends.

What’s the answer?

It’s obvious: We must reduce economic inequality and increase mobility by rebuilding and strengthening the middle class—a middle class that can afford to buy products and services that are the result of the efforts of fairly paid American workers who can then buy goods and services that are the result of the efforts of other fairly paid American workers.

Fortunately, more and more Americans—including a few conservative-leaning politicians—are recognizing that a society where economic rewards are as unevenly and unfairly distributed as ours is a society destined for economic and social collapse.

President Obama’s State of the Union message touched on what has to be done: increase the minimum wage *by a lot*; reform the tax structure; improve our educational system from top to bottom; rebuild our crumbling infrastructure, which will also create jobs and put money in the pockets of the road builders and bridge builders—money that will go right back into the economy.

But talk alone won’t do it.

If we don’t act and act now, not only will Americans be unable to buy American-made products, we won’t have enough money to buy those made in China either.

Johnny Cash said it best: “Time’s a wastin’.”