UP FOR DEBATE

Supply Chains, Workers' Chains, and the New World of Retail Supremacy

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A globalized world of commerce and labor has existed for centuries. The Vanderbilts and the Victorians knew all about the China trade. But today's globalization differs radically from that of even a few decades past because of the contemporary role played by the corporate kingmakers of our day, the big box retail chains that now occupy the strategic heights once so well garrisoned by the great manufacturing firms of the Fordist era. At the crux of the global supply chains stand the Wal-Marts, the Home Depots, and the Carrefours of our time. They make the markets, set the prices, and determine the worldwide distribution of labor for the gigantic stream of commodities that now flows across their counters. The deindustrialization of Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland entailed not just the destruction of a particular set of industries and communities, but also the shifting of power within world capitalism from manufacturing to the retail sector, which today commands the supply chains that girdle the earth and directs the labor power of a working class whose condition replicates much that we once thought characteristic of only the most desperate, early stages of capitalist growth.

All this is graphically apparent upon a visit to the two most dynamic nodes of transnational capitalism today. It is easy to get to Bentonville, Arkansas, where Wal-Mart has its world headquarters in an unimpressive, low-slung building hard by the company's original warehouse. There are lots of direct flights from Denver, Chicago, La Guardia, and Los Angeles to this once-remote Arkansas town. It is still not very big. Hardly more than three hundred thousand people live between Fayetteville and the Missouri line, yet it is one of the fastest growing metropolitan regions in the country. The parking lots are full, the streets are crowded, and new construction is everywhere. Most important, Bentonville is now home to at least five hundred branch offices of the largest Wal-Mart "vendors," who have planted their corporate flag in northwest Arkansas in the hope that they can maintain or increase their sales to the

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world's largest buyer of consumer products. Proctor & Gamble (P & G), which in 1987 may well have been the first company to put an office in Bentonville, now has a staff of more than two hundred in Fayetteville; likewise, Sanyo, Levi Strauss, Nestlé, Johnson & Johnson, Eastman Kodak, Mattel, and Kraft Foods maintain large officers in what the locals sometimes call "Vendorville." Walt Disney's large retail business has its headquarters, not in Los Angeles, but in nearby Rogers, Arkansas. These Wal-Mart suppliers are a who's who of American and international business, staffed by ambitious young executives who have come to see a posting to once-remote Bentonville as the crucial step that can make or break a corporate career.[1] If they can meet Wal-Mart's exacting price and performance standards, their products will be sucked into the stream of commodities that flow through the world's largest and most efficient supply chain. For any manufacturer, it is the brass ring of American salesmanship, which explains why all those sophisticates from New York, Hong Kong, and Los Angeles are buying so many big houses in rural Arkansas.

If Bentonville represents one nerve center of capitalism's global supply network, Guangdong Province is the other. Located in coastal South China, it constitutes the raw entrepreneurial engine that links a vast new proletariat to the American retailers who are putting billions of Chinese-made products on a million U.S. discount store shelves every day. With more than 40 million migrant workers, one hundred thirty thousand garment factories, and new cities, such as Shenzhen, which has mushroomed to more than 7 million people in just a quarter century, Guangdong lays an arguable claim to being the contemporary "workshop of the world," following in the footsteps of nineteenth-century Manchester and early-twentieth-century Detroit. This was my thought when we taxied across Dongguan, a gritty, smoggy, sprawling landscape located on the north side of the Pearl River between Guangzhou (the old Canton) and skyscraper-etched Shenzhen. We drove for more than an hour late one Sunday afternoon, along broad but heavily trafficked streets, continuously bordered by bustling stores, welding shops, warehouses, small manufacturers, and the occasional large factory complex. This is how the cities of the old American Rust Belt must have once looked, smelled—even vibrated.

Because of Shenzhen's proximity to Hong Kong and Macao, as well as its remoteness from the capital, the Chinese government in Beijing chose it as a special economic zone in 1979. A few years later the entire Pearl River Delta became a virtual free market, with low corporate taxes, few environmental or urban planning regulations, and most important, the free movement of capital and profits in and out of the region. The results were spectacular. The gross domestic product in the Pearl River region leaped from $8 billion in 1980 to $113 billion in 2002. Shenzhen's population rose twenty-fold. Guangdong province itself, which covers most of the Pearl

1. Author's interview with anonymous source within the Wal-Mart vendor community, Bentonville, Arkansas, April 29, 2005; Jeff Glasser, "Boomtown, U.S.A.," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 25, 2001, 17–20; Anne D'Innocenzio, "Wal-Mart Suppliers Flocking to Arkansas," *The State* (Columbia, SC), September 21, 2003, 1.

River Delta, produces a third of China's total exports. Ten percent of all that finds its way to Wal-Mart's U.S. shelves.[2]

Although Wal-Mart owns no factories outright, its presence is unmistakable. Its world-buying headquarters is now in Shenzhen, it has already put eleven big stores in the province, with more to come, and Wal-Mart is feared and respected by everyone involved with any aspect of the export trade, which is why the executives at the Yantian International Container Terminal in Shenzhen, now the fourth-largest port in the world, give Wal-Mart–bound cargoes top priority. "Wal-Mart is king," a port official told us. But the Pearl River Delta is not merely an export platform like the border region of northern Mexico or the free trade zones of the Caribbean. In Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and their environs, well-paved roads pass through a staggeringly crowded landscape of factories, offices, dormitories, apartments, and streams of migrant labor. Governments at both the provincial and national level are making huge infrastructure investments; likewise tens of thousands of foreign investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and the United States are building production facilities of increasing complexity and capacity. This makes it possible to transform raw materials into containerized consumer goods in just a few weeks. Managers at the huge Nike–Yue Yuen factory complex in Dongguan bragged that they could fill an order from the states in just two months. Container ships are loaded in half the time it takes in Los Angeles.

Wal-Mart in China is therefore a "joint venture" between the company and the Chinese government. This is not only because so many of its suppliers have governmental investment, but also because, for Wal-Mart and other multinational companies doing business there, a stable currency, political peace, and compliant workforce are nearly as important as low costs. "There might be places in other parts of the world where you can buy cheaper, but can you get [the product] on the ship?" asked Andrew Tsuei, managing director of Wal-Mart's global procurement center in Shenzhen. "If we have to look at a country that's not politically stable, you might not get your order on time. If you deal in a country where the currency fluctuates, every day, there is a lot of risk. China happens to have the right mix."[3]

The workforce in Guangdong, like that of the other coastal provenances, is overwhelmingly composed of migrants from inland villages. The men work in construction and the women in export manufacture and commerce. Factory wages are low—about $100 a month—but far higher than in agriculture, and they are rising fairly quickly because of the labor shortage generated by the export boom in toys, garments, shoes, and electronic devices. However, as in apartheid South Africa or

2. Joseph Y. S. Cheng, *Guangdong: Preparing for the WTO Challenge* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003); Michael Enright, Edith Scott, and Ka-mun Chang, *Regional Powerhouse: The Greater Pearl River Delta and the Rise of China* (Singapore: John Wiley, 2005); Joe Studwell, *The China Dream* (London: Profile Books, 2005).

3. Philip Goodman and Philip Pan, "Chinese Workers Pay for Wal-Mart's Low Prices," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2004.

along the employment pathways carved by so many Mexican workers in the United States, these millions of migrants are essentially stateless. Because their official residence remains the home village, migrant workers in coastal China do not have access to social services or adequate housing so long as they are without residence permits. They work and reside on the sufferance of their employer, which often holds their identity papers until they complete their labor "contract." This is why so many factories throw up huge dormitories, some housing eight or twelve workers to a room, where residence is dependent upon employment at the enterprise next door. Women workers who are fired or get pregnant are practically compelled to return to their home villages. Marriage is difficult because there is so little affordable housing for couples who work in the contract manufacturing sector.[4]

Neither Bentonville nor Guangdong just happened; these anchors of the trans-Pacific supply chain are not the product of some abstract process of globalization, but rather both were constructed by a set of political and policy choices, in the United States and throughout the globe, that have shifted power from manufacturing to retail distribution and from an economy in which the interests of relatively high-wage men played a central role to one in which the flexible, low-wage labor of women is increasingly crucial.

For more than a century, from roughly 1880 to 1980, the manufacturing enterprise stood at the center of the U.S. economy's production/distribution nexus. The government sometimes challenged the more egregious oligopolies, and a few big merchants, such as Sears and A & P, exerted sufficient leverage to actually bargain on prices, but for the most part, mass-production firms administered their price schedules so as to ensure continuous production and a healthy return on investment. General Motors wanted a 20 percent pretax return on investment and, for more than half of the twentieth century, got it, through the New Era economy of the 1920s, the depression and war years, and into the early postwar decades. U.S. Steel, which Andrew Carnegie and J. P. Morgan had created as the de facto price umbrella for the nation's most basic industry, used an elaborate system of freight surcharges—Pittsburgh Plus—to sustain the valuation of its capital-intensive mills and mines in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Ford and General Motors proved shameless in their exploitation of the dealer network that they had built, which is why U.S. car dealers felt themselves in chronic battle with Detroit for most of the twentieth century.[5] Even the manufacturers of food items and light consumer goods, such as Hartz Mountain, Gillette, P & G, 3M, Hershey, Kraft, and Coca-Cola, conducted themselves in an imperious manner when they stocked the shelves of the regional grocery and drug chains that sold their wares. And these manufacturers had a vocal, politically pow-

4. Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 46–48; author interview with Pun Ngai, founder of Chinese Worker Women Network, Hong Kong, September 15, 2005.

5. Alfred Chandler Jr., *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of American Industrial Enterprise* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1962), 158–99; Louis Galambos and Josepth Pratt, *The Rise of the Corporate Commonwealth* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 167–69.

erful ally among the small town merchants who in the 1920s and 1930s demanded "retail price maintenance" laws to curb the power of the retail chains and eliminate the nefarious discount chiselers who had begun to pop up in the less-desirable sections of some big cities.[6]

Today, however, retailers stand at the apex of the world's supply chains. Indeed, the very phrase *supply chain* did not exist twenty years ago. Manufacturers had distribution channels, wholesalers operated throughout a defined sales territory, and retailers had a network of jobbers and suppliers. Academic theorists, such as Emmanuel Wallerstein, developed the idea of a commodity chain as part of a world systems schema. They were not new, not even a product of the industrial era, and as a consequence, such systems of world trade had something close to an organic, naturalistic provenance. Frederick Abernathy and John Dunlop used the phrase "commodity channels" as recently as 1999 to describe the way apparel moved from Asian and Central American suppliers to North American retailers. But in the twenty-first century, *supply chain*, with its hard linkages and sense of domination and subordination, has become the artful phrase. Such theorists as Gary Gereffi and Gary Hamilton have emphasized the market-making potential of the contemporary buyer-driven supply networks to more clearly evaluate the hierarchy of power and profitability that characterizes contemporary global trade.[7]

Thus the global economy revolves around and is driven by the supply chains that have their nerve centers in Bentonville, Atlanta (Home Depot), Minneapolis (Target), Troy, Michigan (K-Mart), Paris (Carrefour), Stockholm (Ikea), and Issaquah, Washington (Costco). The goal of these megaretailers is to procure only those goods that consumers will actually buy, not what the supplier finds it convenient and profitable to ship. Using a wide variety of new information technologies, these retailers collect point-of-sale (POS) data and relay it electronically through their supply chain to initiate replenishment orders almost instantaneously. When Wal-Mart sells a tube of toothpaste in Memphis, that information passes straight through to the P & G headquarters office in Cincinnati, flashing directly to an offshore toothpaste factory, which adjusts its production schedule accordingly. The venerable Ohio home-product manufacturer long used its market power and sophisticated research on consumer buying habits to secure an outsized share of shelf space from traditional retailers. Although many drug and grocery chains considered P & G a self-aggrandizing bully, Wal-Mart turned this power relationship on its head. The retailer's superior POS data collection system enabled Wal-Mart to know more about the consumers of P & G products than

6. Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), for studies of Coca-Cola, Sears, A & P, and the automobile companies.

7. For an overview of the supply chain literature see Jennifer Bair, "Global Capitalism and Commodity Chains: Looking Back, Going Forward," *Competition and Change* 9, no. 2 (June 2005): 129–56; and Frederick H. Abernathy, John Dunlop, Janice Hammon, and David Weil, *A Stitch in Time: Lean Retailing and the Transformation of Manufacturing—Lessons from the Apparel and Textile Industries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz, eds., *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 95–122.

did the manufacturer. By the mid-1990s, Wal-Mart was P & G's largest customer, generating more than $3 billion in sales, or about 20 percent of P & G's total revenue. Executives at the Cincinnati soap maker were well aware that their good fortune turned on Wal-Mart's sufferance, which explains why they bought Gillette in 2005. The $57 billion deal was designed to transform P & G into an even larger supply firm that could challenge Wal-Mart's pricing power and its private label brands. But even this megamerger may not be enough. "If you want to service Wal-Mart you have got to be more efficient," asserted the retail consultant Howard Davidowitz, "The power will stay with Wal-Mart."[8]

Wal-Mart is therefore not simply a huge retailer; increasingly it is also a manufacturing giant in all but name. The retailer tracks consumer behavior with meticulous care and then transmits consumer preferences down the supply chain. Replenishment is put in motion almost immediately, with the supplier required to make more frequent deliveries of smaller lots. This is "just-in-time" for retailers or "lean retailing." To make it all work, the supply firms and the discount retailers have to be functionally linked, even if they retain a separate legal and administrative existence. The giant retailers of our day, Wal-Mart first among them, "pull" production out of their far-flung network of vendors. Manufacturers no longer "push" it onto the retailer or the consumer. To extend the metaphor, the nearly continuous stream of container ships that sail between Shenzhen and the Long Beach/Los Angeles port complex are "pulled" across the Pacific, not "pushed" by the Chinese manufacturers who stuff their product into nearly half a million forty-foot containers each year. Moreover, since available inventory has been cut back, "pull" production requires speed, predictability, and accuracy in the delivery of goods. Constant and unpredictable changes in sales patterns must be met by just-in-time delivery systems. Supply chain management—the new business school buzz phrase—is the science of getting this to happen in the most efficient and cost-effective way.[9]

Elements of this system have existed for decades, but the dramatic growth in the power of the American retail sector began in the 1960s and 1970s when Sears, K-Mart, and some U.S. apparel makers/distributors began to take advantage of the cheap labor and growing sophistication of the light manufacturers in the offshore Asian tigers, especially Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. This was contract manufacturing whereby U.S. retailers directly sourced batches of differentiated goods especially ordered for sale in niche American markets. Wal-Mart opened a buying office in Hong Kong in 1981 and then quickly added a second Far Eastern purchasing office in Taipei. Of course, direct imports by Wal-Mart and other discounters only made up a small share of all the goods sold; in the mid-1980s Sam Walton estimated

8. "Wal-Mart, P&G Link Up for Efficiency," *St. Louis-Post Dispatch*, February 14, 1989; Constance Hays, "What's behind the Procter Deal? Wal-Mart," *New York Times*, January 29, 2005; Davidowitz quoted in Jeremy Grant and Dan Roberts, "P&G Looks to Gain Strength through Unity," *Financial Times*, January 31, 2005, 25.

9. Edna Bonacich with Khaleelah Hardie, "Wal-Mart and the Logistics Revolution," in *Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein (New York: New Press, 2006), 163–88.

that his company's direct imports accounted for only 5.8 percent of its total sales. The bulk of the importing was done by the manufacturers that sold goods to Wal-Mart. Of key import, as Naomi Klein and Steve Ross remind us, was the rise, both cultural and economic, of the "branded" firms that have taken the fashion idea and extended it from upscale women's clothing to shoes, blue jeans, swimwear, toys, athletic equipment, and electronics. Once brands become well established, or the stores that sell those brands achieve cachet, it is no longer necessary for The Gap or Reebok or The Limited to manufacture anything. They design and advertise their product, contract for its manufacture and transshipment, and promote its sales either through other retailers or their own outlets. Production becomes but one stop, one service element, in their tightly coordinated supply chain.[10]

Until about 1985 the supply chains that led from East Asia to the United States were loosely linked and relatively unstable. But in that year, or shortly thereafter, two developments took place that decisively shifted production to mainland China and in the process tightened up the retail supply chains and gave the big box stores even more leverage against their vendors, both foreign and domestic. The first was the 40 percent revaluation of most East Asian currencies negotiated in September 1985 at the Plaza Hotel. Combined with rapidly rising real wages in South Korea and Hong Kong, the Plaza Accords set off a scramble for a new set of export platforms, chiefly in Guangdong and other sites in coastal China. This production shift was rapid but not difficult. A set of Taiwanese and Hong Kong contractors had already begun to supply the American retailers. When they set up new factories in South China, they naturally maintained their existing links with the United States.[11]

The global integration of capitalism is not simply a product of better technology or trans-Pacific currency readjustments, however. Sam Walton and the generation of top executives he groomed were innovative and energetic entrepreneurs who quickly deployed each new generation of telecommunications hardware and computer software to build a system that can track, order, and price a tube of toothpaste from one end of the planet to the other. But neither hard work, clever ideas, nor even the rise of cheap Asian imports would have been enough to have sustained Wal-Mart's tremendous growth—and that of the entire big box retail industry—in the years since 1980. Wal-Mart's extraordinary success is also the consequence of conservative political victories that generated the terrain upon which big box retailing would flourish. These included the collapse in the real value of the U.S. minimum wage, a simultaneous disintegration of the Wagner-era labor law, and the growth of a "free trade" regime that has proved exceptionally beneficial to the conquests made by America's new retail oligarchy.

10. Misha Petrovic and Gary G. Hamilton, "Making Global Markets: Wal-Mart and Its Suppliers," in Lichtenstein, *Wal-Mart*, 107–42; also, Gary G. Hamilton, "Remaking the Global Economy: U.S. Retailers and Asian Manufacturers," presentation before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission during the hearing on "China and the Future of Globalization," Council on Foreign Relations, New York, May 20, 2005; Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 1999).

11. Hamilton, "Remaking the Global Economy."

The minimum wage is crucial because discount retailing is a labor-intensive enterprise. Because margins are so low, wages are decisive to a retailer's competitive profile. Sam Walton knew this in his gut.[12] He systematically broke the minimum wage and overtime laws from the moment Wal-Mart became a small chain. He did this by creating a series of family-centered corporate shells, all of which had retail sales that came in just below the threshold—about a quarter of a million dollars in the 1960s—that enabled Walton to avoid paying the federal minimum wage. This was rather helpful because in 1968 the minimum wage reached its twentieth-century apogee, so Walton could employ, at rock-bottom wages, thousands of women who were pouring off Arkansas and Missouri farms during the years when the revolution in American agriculture belatedly reached the Ozark plateau.

In the late 1960s, when the courts finally ruled that his decentralized ownership structure was but a device to avoid the wage-and-hour law, Walton got lucky. The stagflation that would soon roar through the American heartland stripped the minimum wage of much of its real value. It fluctuated in the early 1970s and then plunged after 1978, just as Walton was expanding his retail barony into metropolitan Missouri, Texas, and Tennessee. Because Walton placed his stores in small communities, where rural, underemployed women were available at the minimized minimum wage, he held a striking competitive advantage over urban/suburban department stores, such as Sears and Macy's, whose wage scales had long been structured by their effort to avoid unionization and retain a core workforce of male workers. Thus today, when Wal-Mart asserts that its average pay is almost twice the minimum wage, it exaggerates only modestly. But in 2006, the buying power of the real minimum wage is a third less than it was thirty years ago.[13]

The second policy vacuum that Wal-Mart exploited was the evisceration of American labor law. Wal-Mart's success was not just a result of its being a low-wage retail operation; the other key was keeping its logistics system nonunion. Among truck drivers and warehouse workers, unionization has been a historically vigorous presence, especially in Missouri, Wal-Mart's growth frontier throughout the 1970s. Walton did not establish Wal-Mart's first distribution center in that state, however, until the mid-1980s. Indeed, Wal-Mart's first three distribution centers were located in Bentonville, its fourth in Searcy. Workers at those centers knew that wages were a couple of dollars higher right across the Missouri line; they also knew that Wal-Mart's frenetic growth was pushing them up against their physical and psychic limits. Organizing efforts and wildcat strikes not surprisingly took place in almost every Wal-Mart distribution center in the 1970s, and unionization attempts were mounted at two of the company's early discount stores in Clinton and Mexico, both small Mis-

12. Sam Walton and John Huey, *Sam Walton, Made in America: My Story* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 127.

13. Jared Bernstein and Isaac Shapiro, "Unhappy Anniversary: Federal Minimum Wage Remains Unchanged for Eight Straight Years, Falls to 56-Year Low Relative to Average Wage," Economic Policy Institute Issue Brief No. 215, September 1, 2005; *West v Wal-Mart*, 264 F. Supp. 158 (W.D. Ark. 1967).

souri towns. Walton crushed both efforts by hiring John Tate, an antiunion lawyer who had fought interracial unionism in the upper South in the 1940s and who, a quarter century later, worked for a new cohort of antiunion meatpacking firms in Nebraska and Colorado that were determined to keep Chicago-style unionism out of their territories. In later years, Wal-Mart developed its infamous "union prevention index" for use by each store to measure and track employee discontent and, if necessary, to trigger the rapid deployment from Bentonville of a squad of antiunion executives skilled in the latest union-avoidance techniques.[14]

Wal-Mart also led the way in squeezing labor costs out of its vendors both at home and abroad. Ironically, the company's famed "Buy American" campaign of the late 1980s proved most useful in this endeavor. The origins of the program lay in a confluence of factors. It is possible that Sam Walton himself was offended by the poor working conditions he witnessed when visiting Central American garment factories in 1984. Of greater consequence was the fact that many Wal-Mart customers blamed the first flush of global competition for causing the recession of the early 1980s, which resulted in the loss of thousands of blue-collar jobs in the mid-South. By the mid-1980s, with the closure of several Arkansas firms, Wal-Mart import practices came under scrutiny. Governor Bill Clinton was among many state officials who appealed to Sam Walton to reconfigure his purchasing program in order to keep more production at home.

Wal-Mart's "Buy American" program proved to be "a public relations coup historic in its dimensions," rued *Discount Store News*, reflecting the chagrin of the Bentonville retailer's competitors.[15] By 1986, Wal-Mart stores were festooned with red-white-and-blue "Buy American" banners and counter signs proclaiming: THIS ITEM, FORMERLY IMPORTED, IS NOW BEING PURCHASED BY WAL-MART IN THE U.S.A. AND IS CREATING OR RETAINING—JOBS FOR AMERICANS![16] Even today, long after the company's formal abandonment of this campaign, Wal-Mart is thought of as a more "American" firm than some of its competitors, even though they actually import fewer goods. Wal-Mart never released firm figures on the proportion of its product costs coming from overseas, but Asian procurement rose steadily during the heyday of the "Buy American" program, as the corporate buying staff resident in East Asia more than doubled in size.

The real import of the "Buy American" campaign lies elsewhere. Wal-Mart would increase domestic purchasing, but the company used the prospect of such procurement as a hammer to drive down supplier costs, including wages and profits, and to transform these vendors into Bentonville pawns. "One of our big objectives" in the "Buy American" program, a Wal-Mart board member told Walton biographer Bob Ortega, "was to put the heat on American manufacturers to lower their prices."[17]

14. Bob Ortega, *In Sam We Trust* (New York: Random House, 1998), 87–90, 105–9.

15. "Wal-Mart Boasts 'Made in USA,'" *Discount Store News*, June 15, 1992, 127.

16. Ortega, *In Sam We Trust*, 208.

17. Ibid., 206.

Wal-Mart recognized that labor costs were much higher in the United States than in Central America or East Asia, but it sought to make up the difference by freezing wages and forcing logistic and production efficiencies on its suppliers. "Our American suppliers," said Sam Walton, "must commit to improving their facilities and machinery, remain financially conservative and work to fill our requirements, and most importantly, strive to improve employee productivity."[18]

Thus an embittered spokesman for the National Knitwear and Sportswear Association complained that Wal-Mart used its "flag-waving" "Buy American" campaign "as a negotiating club that forces domestic manufactures to compete, often unrealistically, with foreign suppliers who pay their help pennies an hour. As a result vendors see their gross sales skyrocket and their net profits plunge." Indeed, a packaged goods vendor told *Discount Store News* that "Wal-Mart's highly proactive approach to product development may, unintentionally, be making American business less competitive." Because Wal-Mart now sets the parameters of product development, companies like his are "no longer manufacturers." Instead they are becoming sources that "produce only the products that Wal-Mart has decided it wants to sell, which in turn make R&D and introduction of new products redundant and unprofitable."[19]

Such was the case with Ferris Fashions, an Arkansas producer of plaid work shirts that became a poster child for the "Buy American" campaign. Three hundred jobs would have been lost in Brinkley, Arkansas, after Van Heusen shifted production offshore had Sam Walton not personally stepped in with a contract for fifty thousand dozen red-check shirts a year (later made famous during Lamar Alexander's run for the presidency in 1996). But now Ferris Fashions was Wal-Mart's creature. The big retailer designed the shirts, found the Taiwanese supplier from which it bought the plaid fabric in huge bulk, and remained virtually the sole customer. When workers at Ferris signed up with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, company president Ferris Burroughs told them to "stop messing around with the union" because Sam Walton "wouldn't buy union goods"; otherwise he would turn the plant into "a chicken coop." Ferris kept making Wal-Mart shirts, but neither unionism nor higher wages ever made an appearance in Brinkley.[20]

Indeed, the "Buy American" campaign actually helped prepare the way for the big box rush to China that took place in the 1990s. By then Wal-Mart had become a de facto manufacturing enterprise, with skilled buyers who helped vendors develop and design products according to the tastes and proclivities of its customers, as analyzed by the "data mining" made possible by Wal-Mart's enormously clever information technology department in Bentonville, not to mention a computer data facil-

18. Michael Barrier, "Walton's Mountain," *Nation's Business*, April 1988, 64.

19. "Wal-Mart Boasts 'Made in the USA,'" 127.

20. Caroline Mayer, "Wal-Mart Flys the Flag in Import Battle; Prods U.S. Producers with Favorable Terms," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1985; Farris Fashions, Inc., and Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, Southwest Regional Joint Board, September 30, 1993, cases 26–CA-14258 and 26–RC-7323, 550. National Labor Relations Board, www.nlrb.gov/nlrb/shared_files/decisions/312/312-89.pdf.

ity said to be second in size only to that of the National Security Agency. Because Wal-Mart has an intimate understanding of the manufacturing process and because its purchasing power is so immense, the Bentonville company, which now employs almost five hundred people in its Shenzhen world purchasing headquarters, has transformed its three thousand Chinese suppliers into powerless price takers, rather than partners, deal makers, or oligopolistic price administrators. Although many of these suppliers are small and undercapitalized, a growing number of East Asian contractors manage factories that are of stupendous size, first among them Yue Yuen Industrial, which makes shoes for Nike, Adidas, Reebok, New Balance, and other well-known brands.[21]

The dialectical relationship between a brand—which is really just a disembodied reputation—and the tangible factory that turns out such branded commodities became graphically apparent to us when we visited the Nike headquarters, located right inside the Yue Yuen factory in Dongguan.[22] Yue Yuen anchors the global supply chain in footwear because it is the largest shoemaker on the planet. It employees upward of two hundred fifty thousand workers in China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong, who turn out some forty footwear brands on two hundred ninety production lines. At the Dongguan facility we visited in September 2005, more than twenty thousand workers, 80 percent women, produce just fewer than a million pairs of shoes a month.[23]

Yue Yuen was not our host when we visited that company's Dongguan factory. Rather it was Nike, whose offices were in the same place, who gave us the royal welcome. They were happy to do so because Nike saw any group of visiting U.S. academics as but another chance to advertise what they considered the exemplary working conditions under which their shoes were manufactured. We were told the Chinese labor codes were strictly enforced; the dining rooms did look clean, and the dormitories were safe, if crowded. Nike had even built a disco and a reading room, full of the Chinese equivalent of *People* and *Cosmo*. Their social responsibility staff numbered about twenty-five. All this cost money—we were told at another Yue Yuan factory that such social amenities and adherence to legal wage and safety standards had pushed the wholesale cost of Reebok shoes from $7 to $11 a pair. This seems excessive, but whatever the cost, Nike, Reebok, and other branded distributors felt it essential to sustain the reputation of their brand and the goodwill of the nongovern-

21. Sam Hornblower, "Wal-Mart & China: A Joint Venture," segment of *Is Wal-Mart Good for America? Frontline* for WGBH Boston, 2004, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/walmart/view; Bill Bowden, "PREL CEO Says Wal-Mart's Policy Is No Sweat, *Northwest Arkansas Business Journal*, June 25, 2001, 1.

22. Richard Appelbaum organized this trip as part of his exploration of global supply chains. Eileen Bors and Karan Shaparo also were participants on the trip and were present during almost all the interviews.

23. Richard Dobson, "Pou Chen Corp.: Shoe-in for Success" (corporate spotlight), *Taiwan Business TOPICS* 33, no. 8 (2005): 1–4; Marcus W. Brauchli and Dan Biers, "Green Lanterns: Asia's Family Empires Change Their Tactics for a Shrinking World," *Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 1995.

mental organizations (NGOs) that have begun to monitor South China production facilities. They do not want to turn CNN on one afternoon and watch an exposé of the poor labor or environmental conditions fostered by a footwear brand whose goodwill is measured in the billions.[24]

Wal-Mart has not neglected this public relations front. Like Nike, Reebok, and other branded distributors, Wal-Mart has an elaborate factory certification program, which was set up right after a devastating 1992 NBC exposé that documented abusive child labor practices in Bangladesh. Since then Wal-Mart has replicated many of the features found in the factory inspection and certification programs that have been supported by such brand-name companies as Nike and Liz Claiborne. Wal-Mart conducts an annual audit of each of the fifty-three hundred factories from which it purchases directly. Also, the company requires audits of supplier factories from which it indirectly sources apparel, shoes, sporting goods, and toys. The company's Ethical Standards Department employs more than two hundred, half in China. And, Wal-Mart has established an elaborate green-yellow-red "traffic light" system that categorizes factories according to their adherence to Wal-Mart's labor and environmental code; 1 percent of all factories fail inspection outright and are dropped from the Wal-Mart supply network.[25]

None of this has enabled Wal-Mart to escape a barrage of criticism. The AFL-CIO was an early and persistent critic, focusing on the use of prison labor by Wal-Mart suppliers in China. Then, in 1995, confronted with evidence that factories producing her clothing line (marketed by Wal-Mart) were employing Honduran children who toiled in sweatshops, Kathie Lee Gifford broke into tears on national television, thereby adding a bit of glitz, and a satisfying victory, to anti–Wal-Mart campaigners. In more recent years the drumbeat of criticism has been almost constant. In 2001, KLD & Co., the largest mutual fund aimed at socially responsible investing, announced that it had sold its shares of Wal-Mart and removed it from the Domini 400 Social Index because the company wasn't doing enough to prevent sweatshop abuses. Wal-Mart has refused to join the Fair Labor Association, a monitoring group endorsed by many companies in the apparel and shoe industry, and it contracts with commercial firms, such as Price Waterhouse Coopers, rather than local NGOs, to conduct its factory safety and labor audits. In 2005, the International Labor Rights Fund inaugurated a lawsuit against Wal-Mart on the grounds that it systematically fails to enforce labor standards in its corporate code of conduct and then lies about it to the American public.[26]

24. Author interviews with Tiger Wu, Nike manufacturing manager, Dongguan, China, September 12, 2005; Dick Ambrocio, senior director, Reebok, Zhongshan, China, September 13, 2005.

25. "Wal-Mart: 2004 Report on Standards for Suppliers," 2005, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., www.walmartfacts.com.

26. Kyle J. Johnson and Peter D. Kinder, "Wal-Mart Removed from DSI: Burma Contracting Cited," *Domini 400 Social Index Decision Series: Number Three*, May 18, 2001, www.domini.com/Social-Screening/creation_maintenance.doc_cvt.htm; Molly Selvin, "Wal-Mart Faces Suit by Labor Group," *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 2005.

Wal-Mart is viewed as the "dirty king" of South China, as one of our NGO informants told us, the "lowest of the low," according to one Reebok executive.[27] Managers at three Wal-Mart supply factories told the Shenzhen-based Institute for Contemporary Observation (ICO)—whose scruffy, bustling offices we visited—that Wal-Mart staff from the company's Shenzhen purchasing department both sought and accepted bribes. Moreover, workers are often coached by their foremen to lie about conditions to inspectors; otherwise, they are told, the factory might lose its orders, which would put them out on the street. In addition, the ICO found that many of Wal-Mart's social responsibility inspection teams "only spent about three hours at the factories, during which they verified wages, working hours and personnel records, made a brief inspection tour of the factory and met three or four workers in the factory office's reception room. Wal-Mart inspections were quite easy to bluff."[28] Indeed, even Wal-Mart CEO H. Lee Scott has admitted that the company needs to become more "committed" and "transparent" in order to "provide additional credibility to our factory certification program."[29]

So why Wal-Mart's poor record? There are two reasons. First, there is an absolute conflict between Wal-Mart's drive for low prices and its effort to enforce a code of conduct. When Wal-Mart's Shenzhen buying headquarters advertises a contract for a big production run, Chinese entrepreneurs jump at the chance to fill it. Even without Wal-Mart's infamous price squeeze, the Chinese are willing to take a loss on a first Wal-Mart contract in hopes that they will recoup their fixed costs in the long run. However, given Wal-Mart's enormous appetite and its bias toward large suppliers, the Chinese vendors must themselves subcontract, and the subcontractors also find their own sources of labor.[30] As with turn-of-the-century garment manufacturing on New York's Lower East Side, no one entity can effectively police the complex network of contractors, subcontractors, and family workshops, but most especially not a private company instead of the state. "The factory owners don't think they violate the law because they do not know the law," said Liu Kai-ming of the ICO. "Ninety percent of Wal-Mart subcontractors and suppliers cannot meet Wal-Mart's own code of conduct."[31]

Contributing to this price and production pressure is the telecommunications infrastructure that keeps the supply chain integrated. This mechanism of instantaneous links between Bentonville and Shenzhen puts relentless pressure on Chinese vendors to meet production and shipping deadlines. Because Wal-Mart is so accu-

27. Author interview with Billy Han, researcher for SACOM (Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior), Hong Kong, September 14, 2005; author interview with Dick Ambrocio.

28. Liu Kai-ming, *Research Report on Global Purchasing Practices and Chinese Women Workers* (Shenzhen: Institute of Contemporary Observation, 2003).

29. H. Lee Scott, "Twenty First Century Leadership," speech delivered October 24, 2005, www.walmartstores.com.

30. Author interview with Tom Mitchell, *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, September 17, 2005.

31. Author interview with Liu Kai-ming, ICO, Shenzhen, September 14, 2005

rate in forecasting its inventory needs, and able to change those forecasts as conditions shift in the United States, it expects the same kind of flexibility from its manufacturers—thus, the stop-and-start nature of work in so many Chinese factories and the heavy amount of overtime punctuated by short work weeks and unpaid vacations. As a manager at a Dongguan company asserted, "We are forced to apply the labor codes . . . but we can judge from our intuition that when production and codes clash, which side we can cling to. Once I phoned their production department and asked, 'Do you still want your products on time?' The monitor then left our company alone."[32]

Second, although Wal-Mart itself is a "brand," few of the products it sells depend on the kind of brand reputation so carefully nurtured by Nike, Reebok, or some of the fashion-apparel makers. This makes the company far less vulnerable to consumer pressures targeted at a well-known product. The commodities Wal-Mart sells are interchangeable. The advantages of all this were driven home to us when Tiger Wu, a production manager at Nike, drove us over to the local Wal-Mart to inspect the shoe department. Nike does not sell its shoes to Wal-Mart, in either China or the United States. They would not be able to command $100 a pair if they were found near the same shelf with the plastic flip-flops. However, Nike has recently purchased the nonbrand Starter line, which Yue Yuan now produces in increasingly large quantities.[33] Shelves at the Dongguan Wal-Mart were full of the cheaper Starter athletic shoes. Mr. Wu was contemptuous of their workmanship but even more so of their invisibility as an attractive brand.[34] From Wal-Mart's perspective, this is highly advantageous; it has no investment in the brand reputation and so can easily and rapidly shift production from one Chinese source to another. As a consequence, the ICO found that "the level of enthusiasm in implementing codes of social responsibility among brand name companies far exceeded that of retailers."[35]

The real value of these corporate codes of conduct, even at the best companies, lies in the realm of ideology. While they legitimize the idea of a worldwide social standard, their chronic failure demonstrates that any genuine transformation of global supply chains belies the reality that such changes must come from other sources, above all the migrant workers themselves. In Guangdong, as in so many other parts of China, resentment, anger, and social conflict lie just beneath the surface. China's Ministry of Public Security reports that the number of "mass incidents" rose eightfold in the decade after 1993. Labor Ministry statistics on industrial disputes have recorded an even more rapid increase, and hardly a week goes by without a journalistic report of a demonstration or police crackdown in the coastal industrial districts.

32. As quoted in Pun Ngai, "Global Production, Company Codes of Conduct, and Labor Conditions in China: A Case Study of Two Factories," *China Journal* 54 (July 2005): 101–13.

33. Associated Press, "Nike Ventures into Discount Shoe Business," Jackson, Miss., *Clarion-Ledger*, April 23, 2005.

34. Author interview with Tiger Wu.

35. Liu Kai-ming, *Research Report on Global Purchasing Practices and Chinese Women Workers*.

Most such conflicts still occur in the northeast rustbelt provinces where layoffs and pension corruption have generated enormous unrest. But the full employment and rising wages of coastal China have done little to ameliorate social conflict. Guangzhou City reported nearly nine hundred protests involving more than fifty thousand workers in 2004. One protest in seven involved more than one hundred people.[36]

These protests are not directed so much at the national government as toward local authorities, specific employers, and corrupt officials. They have not achieved, and seem unlikely to achieve, the national character of the Solidarity movement that challenged the Communist regime in Poland a quarter century ago. They have a far more local, though hardly parochial, thrust, seeking to pressure factory managers and provincial officials to live up to Chinese labor and environmental laws as well as the specific employment contracts and working-condition promises that brought so many to Guangdong's factory districts in the first place. The protesters are fighting for the kind of democratic citizenship that will liberate them from a workplace regime that has left them in a purgatory half stateless and half free. As they push against this system, they begin to crack the chains, supply chains as well as others, that have given Wal-Mart and its retail competitors such overweening power in the global economy.

36. Murray Scot Tanner, "Chinese Government Responses to Rising Social Unrest," testimony presented to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission during public hearing on "China's State Control Mechanisms and Methods," Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, DC, April 14, 2005; John Pomfret, "Labor Unrest in China Reflects Increasing Disenchantment," *Guardian Weekly*, May 4, 2000, 37. This working-class unrest, almost all of it arising without leadership or containment from the Communist-controlled All China Federation of Trade Unions, seems to have prompted an accommodation from the government. See David Barboza, "China Drafts Law to Empower Unions and End Labor Abuse," *New York Times*, October 13, 2006; see also, and skeptically, David Lague, "Official Union in China Says All Wal-Marts Are Organized," *New York Times*, October 13, 2006.