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Jeans with Justice: One Stitch at a Time

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Jeans with Justice: One Stitch at a Time

Abstract

Details the efforts of the CJM (Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras) and Sweatshop Watch to improve the terms and conditions of employment for Levi Strauss workers in Mexico.

Keywords

Business, CJM, Coalition, Conditions, Corporation, Catherwood, Cornell, Economic, Factory, Free, Global, Globalisation, Globalization, Human, ILR, Industrial, International, Justice, Labor, Labour, Lajat, Legislation, Levi, Library, Maquiladoras, Mexico, Organisation, Organization, Relations, Rights, School, Strauss, Sweatshop, Trade, Union, University, Watch, Work, Workers, Workplace



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Lajat/Levi's Campaign

Lajat/Levi's Campaign: We Want Jeans with Justice!

APRIL 27, 2006 UPDATE: Lajat/Levi's Campaign Concludes.

In 2005-2006, Sweatshop Watch supported a campaign led by Lajat workers in Mexico and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM). Demonstrations were organized and letters written to Levi Strauss & Co., one of the labels the workers made. In April, the campaign concluded. Judy Ancel of Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras summarizes the workers' struggle.

Jeans with Justice: One Stitch at a Time
by Judy Ancel

In Mexico, maquiladora workers who fight for justice on the job do not expect a quick fix. Despite the guarantees of labor rights in the constitution, NAFTA, the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the vaunted company Codes of Conduct, they know you only get as much justice as you have the power to win. The Lajat workers in Gomez Palacio, Durango were a quick study in this, but they believed firmly they deserve better than sweatshops, and they were willing to sacrifice to win even a small measure of justice.

They sweated at a plant finishing jeans for Levi's, Mudd, Aeropostale, and other brands. Their struggle began in early 2005 over working conditions and a threatened plant closure. When Lajat fired their organizing committee, they asked for support from the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), the US/Mexico/Canada coalition of which Sweatshop Watch is a member.

CJM went to Levi Strauss and began what was to be a year-long process of negotiations and pressure to enforce Levi's corporate Code of Conduct. Initially Levi's forced Lajat to rehire the fired workers. That gave the workers a real lesson in the power of international solidarity. They told Levi's they had become true believers in the Code and now expected Levi's to enforce it. But it wasn't that easy.

It took lots of pressure on Levi Strauss by CJM and its members like Sweatshop Watch, Global Exchange, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the Cross Border Network, Marin Interfaith Task Force, Transnational Information Exchange, and others to make the Code more than words on paper. Monitoring meant nothing without independent information from the organized workers. Negotiation meant little without outside pressure from consumers. Thanksgiving and Christmas store actions got Levi's attention, but didn't stop Lajat from closing the Gomez plant in January to avoid a union election.

CJM made it clear to Levi's: we weren't going away as long as the workers kept fighting. About 50 of them refused severance and maintained a permanent demonstration in Gomez. In January, a Federal Labor Tribunal granted them the registration for their independent union, which was the first independent union in north central Mexico. They started organizing at Lajat's Torreon plant.

In February, we had a lively demonstration at Levi's Plaza in San Francisco made the evening news. The next day Fernando Lopez representing the Lajat workers and several CJM members met with Levi's executives and hammered out an agreement in which Levi's pledged to tell Lajat they'd cancel their contracts if Lajat did not engage in good-faith negotiations. Levi's even promised to send two vice presidents to Mexico to start the negotiations with a stern reminder of their expectations.

When negotiations began in late March, fifty-seven Lajat workers were at the table or demonstrating outside. Their lawyer and CJM were at the table too. It took several weeks of

face-to-face meetings and phone calls to complete the deal. Unfortunately, the workers didn't get the reinstatement to organize they had wanted, but they kept their union intact. What they got was 100% of everything Lajat owed them: wages, overtime, severance pay, contributions to government benefits funds. Lajat paid 4,250,000 pesos (roughly \$374,000 USD), dropped all charges against workers, and gave each worker a letter of recommendation.

This may not seem like a lot, but in Mexico the struggle for worker justice is really done stitch by stitch. The Lajat workers won an independent union and forced a company to deal with them directly, bypassing the official corrupt unions. That was unprecedented. The Lajat workers and CJM members deepened solidarity locally, across Mexico and internationally, and brought real political pressure on labor officials and the Governor of Durango. Finally, we trained future organizers and gained important organizational knowledge.

The Lajat struggle built broader and deeper unity, but this still wasn't enough to win the workers a contract or overcome the company tactic of firing workers and/or closing plants to avoid independent unions. It did however challenge the status quo and exposed the possibilities.

Judy Ancel is a labor educator in Kansas City and a board member of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras and the Cross Border Network. For more information about the Lajat struggle, go to www.coalitionforjustice.net.

Update from the Feb. 16, 2006 Protest at Levi's Corporate Headquarters in San Francisco



See video footage from

San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center.

On February 16, 2006 a demonstration at Levi Strauss headquarters in San Francisco was organized by Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, Marin Interfaith Task Force, Sweatshop Watch, and Global Exchange, with co-sponsorship from SF/LCLAA, Campaign for Labor Rights, National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Asian Law Caucus, and Chinese Progressive Association. Speakers called on Levi's to enforce its code of conduct, and displayed a solidarity banner signed by dozens of students from around the country affiliated with United Students Against Sweatshops.

On February 17, 2006 a delegation of worker advocates met with the management of several of Levi's departments: Global Code of Conduct, Worldwide Community Affairs, Latin American Affairs, and Levi Strauss Foundation. The delegation consisted of Lajat worker organizer Fernando Lopez, CJM Director Martha Ojeda (via phone), and representatives from CBNJS, Marin Interfaith Task Force, Global Exchange, and Sweatshop Watch. Notably, the delegation obtained several commitments from Levi's to work with Lajat to resolve workers' rights issues. Please stay updated!

ACTION ALERT: Feb. 16, 2006: Ethical Code? Tell Levi's They Can't Have Their Ethical Code AND Sweatshops Too.

Join us in a PROTEST at Levi Strauss & Company's Corporate Headquarters
WHERE: 1155 Battery Street, San Francisco, CA
WHEN: Thursday, February 16, 2006
12 noon.

If you can't make the protest, please send letters of support. Scroll down for a sample letter.

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Ethical Code? Tell Levi's They Can't Have Their Ethical Code AND Sweatshops Too.

MANUFACTURAS LAJAT, a Levi's supplier in Mexico, has violated Levi's code of conduct. In Lajat's Gomez Palacio plant, workers experienced:
12 hour workdays with no overtime pay, exposure to dangerous chemicals, dirty bathrooms, and blocked exits.

UNDER Mexican Labor law and Levi's code of conduct, workers have a right to freedom of association. However, when workers formed an independent union, they faced: Intimidation, midnight visits from amangement, blacklisting, firring, police attacks, factory closure by Lajat to avoid the union.

NOW Mexico's federal labor tribunal and a local labor board have granted Lajat workers registration for their independent union—a historic victory! Support these workers by attending a protest at Levi's headquarters!

Levi's is Lajat's most important client. Levi's did nothing when Lajat illegally closed its Gomez Palacio plant. In Fact, Levi's increased its order to Lajat, even though Lajat refuses to recognize the union, pay workers their legal severance, and pay the Mexican government thousands of dollars it owes for workers' health & housing programs.

Join the protest. Tell Levi's:

- Lajat workers want jeans with justice.
- Levi's should ensure Lajat recognizes the union and follows the law.

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Please email letters of support! Below is a sample letter:

To: Michael Kobori

Vice President, Global Code of Conduct
Levi Strauss & Co.
MKobori@levi.com

Dear Michael Kobori:

We are aware of the struggle of Lajat workers in Gomez Palacio, Durango, Mexico for dignified treatment and freedom of association. Lajat has repeatedly violated your Code of Conduct, and we feel that your efforts to get compliance have been insufficient. Now, against the odds, the workers have gotten their independent union officially recognized by the labor board. Either Levi Strauss will stand on the side of ethical and legal rights for these workers or you will condone union busting. You are a major customer of Lajat and you have the economic power to demand that Lajat comply with your Code. It's up to you.

We demand that Levi Strauss secure compliance from Lajat on the following:

- 1) Reinstatement of all fired workers from the Gomez Palacio plant either by reopening the plant or providing jobs at the Torreon plant including transportation
- 2) That Lajat stop its union busting and fully respect the rights of its workers to organize in a union of their own choosing.
- 3) That Lajat remove workers' names from the blacklist and cease using it.
- 4) That all workers be paid what is owed them including unpaid wages, unpaid overtime, and that they pay all outstanding contributions to government benefits funds including IMSS-Social Security and INFONAVIT-housing funds.
- 5) If Lajat refuse to reinstate the workers Lajat must also pay full severance according with Mexican Law

Sincerely,

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ACTION ALERT: Jan. 20, 2006:The Lajat Workers Win Government Recognition of their Independent Union, But the Company Won't Recognize It.

Great news: the Lajat workers became the first independent union to achieve government recognition in Gomez Palacio, Mexico! The independent union's recognition by the government is an important step forward in this campaign. The workers have been fighting for a union to represent their voices and improve conditions in the jeans factory. However, they were met with fierce opposition by the management and Mexican government officials, who some say were complicit with the garment

manufacturer. Thank you to all of you who wrote letters and protested with us.

Although the government has recognized the union, the workers still need your support! Please continue to write letters to Levi's, who is Lajat's major client, to demand:

- Lajat reinstate the workers and recognize the independent union
- Lajat eliminate the blacklist
- Levi's enforce its own business terms of engagement, which explicitly states, "We expect our suppliers to respect the right to free association and the right to organize and bargain collectively without unlawful interference."

We are also asking people to send letters to Mexican government officials.

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SAMPLE LETTERS

Michael Koberi
 Vice-President, Global Code of Conduct
 Levi Strauss Co.
 MKoberi@levi.com

Dear Mr. Koberi:

We learned that the Mexican Superior Tribunal decided in favor of the Lajat workers' independent union. However, Lajat is refusing to reinstate the workers and recognize the independent union. This is another example of how Lajat persistently violates both Mexican Labor Law and Levi's Code of Conduct. As US consumers, we asked you what is the meaning of your code of conduct if Levis does not enforce it with its suppliers?

We demand that Levi Strauss produce jeans in accordance with its Code and internationally recognized labor rights and that it require Lajat to respect the Mexican Labor Law by reinstating the workers and recognizing the independent union.

Sincerely,

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Sr. Contador Ismael Hernández Deraz

Gobernador del Estado de Durango
 Email: parti@durango.gob.mx

Dear Governor Hernandez:

We are aware that the Superior Tribunal decided in favor of the Lajat workers independent union. This is proof that the President of the CAB Javier Cobarrubias sided with Lajat and the CTM official union when he denied the workers' petitions. Cobarrubias also never set the date to freeze the assets of Lajat. Lajat is refusing to reinstate the workers and to recognize the independent union. Furthermore, Lajat claims it does not have money to pay legally mandated severance pay to the workers. This is another example of Lajat's Labor Law violations.

You should intervene to guarantee that workers' rights be respected, that workers be reinstated, and that their independent union be recognized by Lajat.

Sincerely,

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Dec. 17, 2005: PROTEST AT LEVIS STORE:

Sweatshop Watch organized a protest at the Levi's Store in Santa Monica, CA to support Mexican garment workers.



What's the Story?

Since January 2005, Mexican garment workers in a Levi's supplier factory, Manufacturas Lajat, have been organizing to address sweatshop conditions. The workers are trying to form an independent union, but their right to freedom of association has not been respected. Levi's is the main client of Lajat.

[Download and send a postcard](#) to Levi's, asking the company to follow its business terms of engagement.



LEVI'S- A STYLE FOR EVERY "SWEATSHOP" STORY?

[Download this flier \(PDF\)](#).

The Original: made in Lajat's Gomez Palacio factory by workers who experienced the "same old" conditions:

- 12 hour work days with no overtime pay
- exposure to harsh chemicals for stonewashing jeans without any protection
- lack of access to drinking water and restrooms in the factory
- no lunchroom, forcing workers to eat on the production floor where stray dust and chemicals contaminate their food.

The SuperLOW Cut: cut and sewn in a workplace where management acted "superlow" when workers tried to form an independent union. Workers see Lajat taking drastic measures to avoid a union drive including:

- visiting workers at their homes at midnight
- using the local police to beat and gas workers
- locking out workers
- blacklisting
- reducing workers' wages to starvation levels.

Worker organizing began when Lajat announced it would close down the factory in Gomez Palacio, and transfer workers to another factory miles away without paying for the transportation. Workers saw this as a move to avoid severance pay, which is mandated under Mexican law.

The BOOTcut: Assembled in a factory where workers got the "boot" for organizing. Workers are demanding that Levi's enforce its business terms of engagement, which states "We expect our suppliers to respect the right to free association and the right to organize and bargain collectively without unlawful interference."

Workers demand that:

- Levi's and Lajat ensure that a union election takes place fairly.
- Levi's should make certain Lajat ends the blacklist & police harassment.
- If the Gomez Palacio plant is not reopened, then workers must be reinstated at another Lajat factory, with transportation fully paid.

We want a sweat-FREE story!

Sweatshop Watch is supporting this campaign, led by the Lajat workers and the Coalition for Justice in Maquiladoras. For more information, see [Coalition for Justice in Maquiladoras](#).