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Truck the GAP: Jeff the Trucker is a Better Symbol of America's Workers

Forget Joe the Plumber. One of America's real working class heroes is Jeff the truck driver.

Jeff Wallace, 43, has been on the picket lines for six weeks. He's fighting for good healthcare for his kids and to make sure he has something to walk away with when he retires from his grueling job for Oak Harbor Freight Lines in Seattle, where he's worked for about 14 years.

This week Jeff was hit on the picket line by a replacement worker in a pick-up truck who then drove away. Jeff went to the hospital but said he's still not giving up. He'll stay out on the line as long as it takes.

Jeff is one of 600 drivers, warehouse and office workers for Oak Harbor, which transports merchandise for many retailers, including The GAP, on the west coast. They walked off the job on September 22 to protest on-the-job abuses and the company's proposal to cancel the health care coverage of retired employees. The workers, members of the Teamsters union, complained that the company bullied and intimidated union members during contentious contract talks that began over a year ago.

Oak Harbor proposed raising many retirees' health premiums by \$400 to \$700 per month. Even though its workers' pension plan is already substantially below industry standards, Oak Harbor also proposed freezing contributions for five years. It sought to deny workers overtime pay for weekend work on GAP business. It also insisted on prohibiting union representatives from access to workers at their workplaces.

Instead of negotiating with striking workers in good faith, Oak Harbor, based in Aurora, Washington, has imported teams of professional strikebreakers to coerce and scare loyal long-time employees.

Several organizations, including, Sweatfree Communities, the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation, the International Transport Workers' Federation, and Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior, have called on The GAP -- which last year had \$15.8 billion in revenues and owns four of the most recognized apparel brands in the world (GAP, Banana Republic, Old Navy and Piperlime) - to suspend its relationship with Oak Harbor.

To draw attention to their situation, the workers took their protest to the GAP's world headquarters in San Francisco. They draped a 35-foot banner - "GAP: Don't Harbor Oak Harbor's Retiree Abuses" - from a huge billboard next to the company's headquarters.

During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama and John McCain have expressed big differences over their concern for workers' rights. Obama supports the Employee Free Choice Act, which would reform the nation's archaic labor regulations and make it harder for corporations and union-busting consultants to block workers' right to union representation.

But the strike against Oak Harbor - a key link in GAP's global supply chain -- reveals that many workers who are already unionized face threats from businesses to their on-the-job protections. The workers' protest demonstrates how powerful big-brand companies like the GAP have developed ways to hide their own complicity in worker abuses.

Are companies responsible for the abusive practices of their subcontractors? Because the GAP subcontracts its transportation services, its executives claim it shares no responsibility for Oak Harbor's abusive demands: the loss of healthcare coverage for retirees, the loss of paid sick leave for employees, the reduction of pension benefits, the right to prohibit union representatives from talking to workers at the workplace, and a special "GAP" rule that would deny overtime pay for weekend work on GAP business.

When Oak Harbor hires the notorious strike-breaking security firm, Modern Staffing and Security, and Seattle's leading union avoidance law firm, Davis Grimm Payne and Marra, GAP denies any collusion. And when Oak Harbor, to break worker solidarity, lures African-American striker replacements from the South with promises of permanent jobs and high wages, and then fires them when local white replacement workers become available, can GAP really claim that it is not complicit in this cynical form of racial discrimination?

After decades of dogged confrontation, anti-sweatshop consumer groups and international workers rights advocates have effectively forced companies such as the GAP to take responsibility for abuses in overseas factories that manufacture its merchandise, even though they subcontract the work. They now acknowledge, however reluctantly, that there is a clear legal and moral link between the retailer and the subcontractor that makes the clothing and sews the GAP's label on the apparel.

When journalists and labor rights groups exposed "slave-like" child labor conditions earlier this year at GAP clothing contractors in India, GAP officials moved with haste to remedy the problem to the satisfaction of human rights watchdog groups. When some of these same groups protested the Oak Harbor abuses, however, GAP defended its position.

Other major retailers such as REI and Urban Outfitters have dropped Oak Harbor in response to the labor dispute. But GAP

has refused to switch transport services, claiming that it does not want to disrupt business right before the Christmas shopping season. Had this been a human rights campaign in support of workers in an overseas manufacturing facility, one suspects The GAP would have been more concerned about being this Christmas' poster child for a sweatshop brand than about getting a break on transportation costs.

GAP's two-faced approach is remarkable because the company acknowledges responsibility for labor violations on the manufacturing side of its global supply chain while shirking responsibility from the transportation side here in its home market.

What is remarkable in the Oak Harbor situation is that American workers now find it necessary to use the same tactics - and make similar demands seeking adherence to basic international labor rights -- as did sweatshop workers in developing countries.

It is time for GAP to realize that it has a moral responsibility to Jeff the truck driver, who moves its merchandise, takes pride in his job, and deserves a decent wage, affordable health care, and a pension when he retires. And after November 4, Jeff - and millions of other employees who lose their basic rights when they go to work - should become the symbol for a new wave of grassroots organizing to reform the nation's labor laws.

Peter Dreier teaches politics and directs the Urban & Environmental Policy program at Occidental College in Los Angeles. For more information about the Oak Harbor strike, go to the union's website.