

Looking for the UNION LABEL

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*Look for the union label
when you are buying that coat, dress or blouse.
Remember somewhere our union's sewing,
our wages going to feed the kids, and run the house.
We work hard, but who's complaining?
Thanks to the I.L.G. we're paying our way!
So always look for the union label,
it says we're able to make it in the U.S.A.!*

There's a shop on Portland's North Interstate Avenue that sells something hard to find: U.S.-made garments, made by union workers. Many of the clothes even sport the union label. In fact, the shop is packed, ceiling to floor, with well-made coats, dresses and blouses, and the prices are reasonable. These clothes were made to last. And it's a good thing they were, because every garment in AlexSandra's Vintage Emporium is 40, 50, 60 years old.

"There's nothing in here made in China," says owner AlexSandra, (pictured at right) for whom that's a point of pride.

AlexSandra, 29, organizes a monthly vintage fashion show, at which in October, she got a singer to perform "Look For The Union Label." The song — a catchy jingle in a union ad campaign — aired on national television from 1975 to 1982. It was intended to make union members proud — but also, indirectly, to warn consumers of the danger imported goods posed to the American way of life.

Outsourcing, to low-wage foreign factories, killed U.S. apparel manufacturing. Last year, imports made up 91 percent of apparel and 99 percent of shoes sold in the United States. U.S.-made is largely confined to uniforms and workwear, men's suits, and quick-turnaround items.

And apparel is just a small part of an unmistakable trend. The United States hasn't had a trade surplus since 1975, and the annual trade deficit has soared since the early 1990s, passing \$100 billion in 1996 and \$758 billion in 2006.

For the most part, the deficit isn't about foreign companies selling into the U.S. market; it's about U.S. companies outsourcing production to foreign contractors.

Clothing was one of the first U.S. industries to shift manufacturing overseas. Other industries followed, including toys, tools, electronics and housewares.

"We still make things here," says Robert Scott, an economist with the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think-tank that advocates shared prosperity. "But we make machine tools and electronic parts and industrial equipment, tractors — things you don't see on the storeroom floor at Target."

In short, consumer goods of all kinds that once might have been made by American workers are now largely produced by workers overseas.

When finding a "Made in USA" label in a mall or department store can take hours, looking for the union label can be pretty daunting. The AFL-CIO's Union Label and Service Trades Department, responsible for promoting union-made goods, has just one staffperson. Charlie Mercer organizes an annual union products trade show in a U.S. city, and maintains a list of union-made products at www.unionlabel.org. The department used to publish that list in book form, but Mercer said the companies on the list were so rapidly offshoring and de-unionizing that it became impossible to keep the book up to date. Even the Web list was swiftly becoming obsolete, so the Union Label board voted a few years ago to purge anything on the list older than five years. Of the remaining 2,000 items, very few are available to consumers in retail form. And the list is littered with defunct Web sites and incomplete information.

Last month, the Oregon AFL-CIO sent a questionnaire to over 100 offices of affiliated unions asking for information about products made by Oregon union members. Just three unions responded.

While union labels have become rarer than bald eagles, the "Made in China" labels seem to be on nearly everything.

Of course, locating them can also be a challenge. U.S. Customs rules require all imported manufactured goods to be labeled by country of origin when they enter the United States,



but the label is usually in small print on an out-of-the-way part of the box. There's no rule against retailers covering that up with their own price sticker, as they commonly do. Other tricks abound. You have to be a savvy shopper to know that the PRC in "Made in PRC" means People's Republic of China, or that Macau and Hong Kong are China as well. "Designed in USA" or the location of the U.S. company headquarters may display prominently while "Made in China" hides in the fine print. Web sites may advertise "Made in USA" only to ship products la-

beled "Made in China."

"I think U.S. consumers really are stuck," said Barbara Briggs, senior associate at the National Labor Committee, an anti-sweatshop group. "There's no way we can buy ourselves out of this problem."

Buying union or U.S.-made might ensure that goods weren't made in a sweatshop, but consumers don't have that option in most cases, Briggs said.

"Until we have strong laws to protect workers," Briggs said, "we all will be wearing and consuming sweatshop [goods] every day."

Congress has done little or nothing to slow the outsourcing of U.S. manufacturing jobs to foreign sweatshops, and in fact has ratified numerous trade agreements that likely made it even easier.

But Briggs' organization is backing a modest proposal that might start to turn things around.

The Decent Working Conditions and Fair Competition Act, introduced in January by U.S. Sen. Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, would declare sweatshops a form of unfair competition, and would prohibit the sale of sweatshop goods in the United States. The bill has 15 co-sponsors in the Senate. No Oregon or Washington senator has signed on. The House version has 134 co-sponsors, including Peter DeFazio of Oregon and Brian Baird of Southwest Washington. Of the five members of Congress seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton and Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich are the only co-sponsors.

[Senators Joe Biden, Chris Dodd, and

Barack Obama have not signed on.]

If such a law had passed 30 years ago, maybe the union label wouldn't today be confined to vintage clothing stores. Now, if it were to pass and be strictly enforced, it's not clear what will remain on American store shelves.

"Our globalized economy has become a race to the bottom," Briggs said, "based on what country and what workers are desperate enough to accept the lowest wages, the worst working conditions, essentially the most misery."

Some union gift ideas

All hope is not lost to buy union gifts with your union paycheck. Below are a few ideas. But if you've got kids on your gift list, you may want to start with a lead test kit to help check for lead in Chinese toys. United Steelworkers is selling lead test kits for a penny each, plus \$2.97 to ship. The kits contain two lead check swabs, a test verification sheet, reporting forms, manufacturer's directions, information on recent recalls and a tip sheet about what you can do to help stop toxic imports. Buy online at steelworkersmerchandise.com or by calling 1-888 SAY-USWA.

- Candies at See's Candies, manufactured at two California locations by members the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers.
- Tickets to the Oregon Symphony or Oregon Ballet Theater, where the musicians are members of American Federation of Musicians Local 99.
- An Alaskan cruise on Norwegian Cruise Line, which has union crews made up of U.S. citizens.
- Outdoor knives and multipurpose tools by Tigard-based

Gerber Legendary Blades, where some workers belong to the Machinists Union.

- Books, calendars, and cards at Portland-based Powells Books, one of the few union bookstores in the United States, where workers belong to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 5.

- Boots by Portland-based Danner Boot, represented by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555.

- Tillamook cheese, made by workers represented by the Teamsters and Operating Engineers Local 701. Buy it at Albertsons, Safeway, or Fred Meyer, where many stores employ members of UFCW Local 555.

- Men's shirts by New Orleans-based Kenneth Gordon, where workers belong to UNITE HERE; available online at www.kennethgordon.com.

Lastly, be sure to mail your gifts via the all-union U.S. Postal Service or UPS — not anti-union FedEx, which is defending itself in multi-state lawsuits over its classification of drivers as "independent contractors."