

Review: NO LOGO

No Logo by Naomi Klein (Flamingo Press, IR £11.13/stg£8.99)

Workers Solidarity Movement

2001

The publication of No Logo was perfectly, if unintentionally, timed. Just as the N30 demonstrations in Seattle made headlines around the world, No Logo arrived to explain some of the reasons for that movement. So although Naomi Klein has made it clear that she is not an 'official' spokesperson for the movement – that this movement has no official spokespeople – at a time when observers (and even some participants) wondered what was going on, No Logo provided some answers.

Klein starts by discussing how advertising and general business practices have changed in the last twenty years. Essentially, companies decided that they were no longer in the business of selling products, because products are messy, they can be copied, or even improved on. But if you are selling an idea, an experience, a set of associations, it's much harder for another company to compete with you. Sportswear is a good example of a market where price, and even quality, isn't that important – people choose between Nike and Adidas because of their ad campaigns, not their shoes.

At the same time as companies started this emphasis on brands rather than products, they started moving out of manufacturing. Owning a factory was thought to tie a company down, because then you have the constant expense of wages, as well as the money tied up in buildings and equipment. Manufacturing still has to take place of course, if not by you then by your suppliers, but then dealing with workers can be someone else's problem, and you can concentrate on building your brand.

Now a lot of the actual manufacturing of clothes, computer parts, and other industries has moved to the developing world. Unlike the west, where workers expect a decent wage, and are organised enough to demand it, in the free trade zones in China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Mexico, and many more countries, factories can be run with little outside interference. The description of these free trade zones, where workers sometimes work up to 100 hours a week, in appalling conditions, is the most interesting and useful part of the book. Workers there are barely paid enough to live on, and often work compulsory (and sometimes unpaid) overtime. Most of the workers in these factories are young women, migrants from other provinces, because they are thought to be easier to dominate, and less capable of organising themselves. Even when workers start to unionise, they can be summarily fired, and large-scale agitation faces the constant threat that the factory will be simply packed up and moved to another zone. Solidarity with these

workers, and outrage at the conditions they live in, was one of the driving forces of the Seattle and Prague protests.

Where No Logo fails is in its attempt to tie these different themes together. Klein tries to argue that companies have to spend more money on ‘branding’, and this is why production is moving to sweatshops. Companies can’t afford to have factories and a brand, so they ditched the factories. But its not just the big brands that are made in sweatshops. Nike runners may be made in Indonesia, but so are the own-brand runners in your supermarket. Gap shirts are made in sweatshops, but so are the shirts in the department store. The sweatshops aren’t a result of branding, they’re a product of the desire of companies to cut costs. Some companies will then keep their prices low, while others will spend a lot on advertising, but hope to make even more by charging higher prices.

The sweatshops are, after all, nothing new. They existed in the west, alongside hellish factories, and unsafe mines about a century ago¹, and it wasn’t because the Victorians had just discovered advertising. Bosses always try to keep their costs down, because decent pay and safe working conditions just eat into their profits. Conditions didn’t improve because the rich had a change of heart – every pay rise, every reduction in the working week, every safety standard had to be fought for. The same struggle is going on around the world today, and it’s a fight against capitalism, not logos.

This is why No Logo is ultimately disappointing. When it tries to be constructive, and suggest actions we can take, too much time is spent talking about ‘subverting’ advertisements, or painting over billboards. Ads may be annoying, and this kind of thing can be fun, but it doesn’t really accomplish anything. Consumer boycotts are explored, even while their weaknesses are admitted.² So there’s less room to explore ways that we in the west can help sweatshop workers get organised, and how we can help their struggles, which should be the objectives of any campaign. No Logo is still an interesting book, and possibly a good introduction for those who don’t know much about the issues involved. But as a political analysis, or a guide to action, it’s severely limited by Klein’s unwillingness to admit that the problem is not advertising, but capitalism.

¹ There are some direct parallels – in China, textile workers are frequently locked into their factories so the women will have no choice but to work, and ‘outside agitators’ can’t get in. Because textiles are highly flammable, there have been several fires at these factories, and in some cases the factory has burned down with the workers still trapped inside. Exactly the same thing – doors locked in a textile factory, for the same reasons, with the same tragic results – happened in New York in the early 20th century, most notably the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire.

² Boycotts may be effective when they have a single clear target, like Shell’s actions in Nigeria, but they may just prompt a whitewash campaign, and a series of apologies from the companies concerned, until they think the spotlight has moved on to someone else. Since Nike has been a focus of the anti-sweatshop campaign, Reebok can pose as the ethical alternative, even though their work practices are exactly the same.

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