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Out Of Sight: The Long And Disturbing Story Of Corporations Outsourcing Catastrophe



Synopsis

When jobs can move anywhere in the world, bosses have no incentive to protect either their workers or the environment. Work moves seamlessly across national boundaries, yet the laws that protect us from rapacious behavior remain tied to national governments. This situation creates an all-too-familiar "race to the bottom," where profit is generated on the backs of workers and at the cost of toxic pollution. In *Out of Sight*, Erik Loomis—a historian of both the labor and environmental movements—follows the thread that runs from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York in 1911 to the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2013. The truth is that our systems of industrial production today are just as dirty and abusive as they were during the depths of the industrial revolution and the Gilded Age, but the ugly side of manufacturing is now hidden in faraway places where workers are most vulnerable. Today, American capitalists threaten that any environmental regulations will drive up the cost of production and force them to relocate our jobs to a country where they don't face such laws and can re-create their toxic work conditions. It wasn't always like this. In his insightful book, Loomis shows that the great environmental victories of twentieth-century America—the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the EPA—were actually union victories. This history is a call to action: when we fight for our planet, we fight for our own dignity as workers and citizens.

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"Corporations haven't improved since the worst days of the industrial era; they've simply gotten better at hiding their misdeeds from consumers." That's the essence of Erik Loomis's concise

survey of corporate behavior in the 20th and early 21st centuries. When increasingly empowered American workers joined with consumers who became concerned about the cost of domestic labor and environmental abuses, most of America benefited from mid-century reforms that led to a cleaner environment and better conditions for workers. But in the last forty years, the ability of corporations to shift capital around to avoid regulation and public oversight has undermined the security of American workers while exploiting disenfranchised communities at home and abroad. The poster child for this kind of shell game is the use of Bangladeshi subcontractors by Western clothing companies, where women and children work in dangerous and abusive environments before going home to communities that have been poisoned by the noxious byproducts of the manufacturing process. But as Loomis points out, these kinds of humanitarian and environmental abuses occur in many other industries, including industries that still have a presence in the US and industries that have a more positive public image. Unfortunately, American politicians continue to enable these kinds of abuses through treaties and laws that prioritize capital mobility over basic human rights. American workers have been intimidated and marginalized by corporations eager to use the threat of relocation, degrading the capacity to fight for better treatment. And because consumers are insulated from the ugly origins of their household goods they no longer feel the moral imperative to demand reforms.

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