Work can kill, as workers well know. And not just the long-recognized high-risk jobs like the building trades. Other jobs, where the risks are less obvious, are just as health-damaging. Jeans manufacture is a textbook case. Some years ago, a team of researchers and doctors from the Atatürk University in Erzurum (north-eastern Turkey) found a link between jeans manufacture and silicosis, one of the worst respiratory tract diseases.

Around five billion pairs of jeans are made throughout the world each year. Not only are jeans among the best-known and popular items of clothing, but the fabric itself has a long tradition and a celebrated history, beginning in the Italian town of Genoa several centuries ago, when port workers adopted it for work clothing because of its resistance. It was only in the 1950s that it began to sweep through lifestyles and mass culture to become a global cultural icon.

One of the trendiest fashions in jeans is faded denim, with its characteristic look halfway between old and vintage, bordering on worn-through. Many youngsters in the 1960s used bleach to get that effect. As faded denim gradually became the “must have” look, jeans manufacturers channelled the fashion, adapting to capture the new market. They rapidly developed an industrial-scale production process to produce these kinds of jeans in the millions. A huge business volume generated by the simplest of processes. Blasting stones with compressed air jets produces a very fine sand whose abrasive and erosive effect both softens the denim and lightens its original deep colour.

It is an operation that is extremely damaging to the health of the worker who performs it; all throughout the treatment, he will be continuously breathing in minute dust particles that cause severe diseases of the airways. A combination of factors adds to the danger of this activity and the speed with which it harms workers’ health: permanent exposure to dust, cramped treatment rooms, long working hours, and in many cases completely unhygienic workshops with no form of health protection. On top of that, the sand-blasting rooms are rarely ventilated because the employers’ aim in all circumstances is to avoid the dispersion of dust which might push up their costs.

Silicosis is an incurable – but preventable – occupational disease. And yet people across the world are still dying of it. In Turkey, 40 jeans industry workers have died of silicosis in recent years alone. In April 2009, a ministerial instruction finally banned the hand sanding of jeans in response to pressure from a joint committee of workers, unions, doctors and civil society organizations. But Turkish manufacturers are already outsourcing these activities elsewhere.

Silvania Cappuccio
Occupational Health & Safety Officer, International, Textile, Garment & Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF)
Business owners are keen to profit from this labour supply in return for monthly pay of 500-900 Turkish pounds (230-400 euros). Production operations require few facilities and little machinery. Workers are crowded into cramped, enclosed spaces without ventilation so as to minimise sand loss. It matters little that the excess dust ends up deposited deep in the pulmonary alveoli (air cells) of the hapless sandblasting workers, who are often young immigrants, some even children, from inland Turkey or Romania, Bulgaria, Moldavia, Georgia or Azerbaijan.

**From 10 000 to 15 000 workers concerned**

Forty jeans manufacturing workers have died of silicosis in Turkey in recent years. In April 2009, a Ministry of Labour and Social Security instruction finally banned the hand sanding of jeans and any other clothing with the stated aim of preventing the development and spread of silicosis. At the same time, the government announced that sixty-odd illegal workshops would be shut down, enforcement improved, and pension rights guaranteed for the workers concerned.

The announcement of the ban was greeted with howls of conspiracy from Turkish firms, many of which began to outsource their production to Chinese, Indian, Egyptian and Bangladeshi firms.

The same result as that obtained by hand sanding of fabrics can be achieved with heavy-duty industrial equipment - but at a higher cost. Which is why firms prefer to shift the risks onto weaker and less well-protected workers. In a globalised economy, and where there are no binding international labour standards, the profit motive easily wins out over ethical considerations.

No-one questions the importance of the ban introduced by the Turkish government. But it alone cannot eradicate the problem of illegal workshops and their reality shaped by a culture of exploitation and trampling on the most elementary rights.

The government’s decision is the culmination of pressure exerted by a committee set up by the workers concerned with the support of scientific and nongovernmental organizations, universities and trade unions. The committee is working to get the Turkish authorities to accept their share of responsibility. Between 10 000 and 15 000 people are believed to work in Turkey’s denim industry. Many have contracted silicosis. The committee has emphasised the responsibilities of multinationals, SMEs and big fashion industry names that cynically turn a blind eye to the reality of the subcontracting industries, and has drawn up a list of specific national and international demands. Specifically, it wants this type of work to be outlawed worldwide, and for International Labour Organization and the World Health Organization safety and health at work regulations and resolutions to be complied with. It also wants the government to pay for tests, diagnosis and treatment of the disease contracted by workers, whether Turkish nationals, legal or illegal immigrants. It is calling for a tripartite commission of the relevant ministries and social partners to be set up as a matter of urgency to help workers in dealing with officialdom. And it wants public authorities that have failed to carry out the necessary inspections and not performed their duties to be brought to justice.

The European and International, Textile, Garment & Leather Workers’ Federations are actively supporting the Turkish trade unions’ campaign to protect workers’ health. They are running a trade union workplace information and training programme in the worst-affected regions. They have also petionned the health ministers of immigrant workers’ countries of origin for help through providing screening tests and appropriate healthcare. They are also encouraging prevention programmes and calling for a guaranteed healthy and safe working environment in all countries. Because not a single worker more should be killed for the sake of jeans.

**Multinationals, SMEs and big fashion industry names cynically turn a blind eye to the reality of the subcontracting industries.**

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Hand sandblasting was developed in Turkey in the 1990s as a more effective alternative to chemical fading – which gives a too-uniform effect – and cheaper than recent laser technology.

[Image: © AFP]