

# MANUFACTURING & TECHNOLOGY NEWS

December 21, 2015 Volume 22, No. 14

Home

Subscribers  
Only

Corporate  
Access

Search  
Back Issues

How To Order

Calendar

Reports

Acronyms

Guest Editorials

Links

Trading  
Exchanges

Contact Us

About Us

Sign up for our  
Email Newsletter

GO

## Quick Job Search

Enter Keyword(s):

Enter a City:

Select a State:

Virginia

Select a Category:

## Manufacture New York Hopes To Help Revive Once Thriving U.S. Apparel Industry

By Richard A. McCormack  
richard@manufacturingnews.com

It didn't take long for the United States to lose almost 90 percent of its jobs making clothes. In 1990, there were 938,000 Americans manufacturing apparel, but their jobs started to be outsourced in earnest after NAFTA was signed in 1994, then more precipitously after China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, followed by the phase out of the Multi-Fiber Arrangement in 2004, which eliminated quotas on imported clothing.

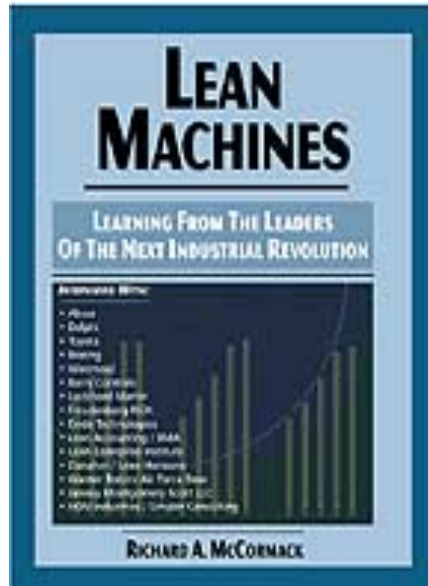
As of November 2015, there were only 137,000 jobs left in the U.S. apparel manufacturing sector -- an all-time low since data started being gathered in 1939 -- and down from 1.4 million apparel workers in 1970.

The United States, which for centuries was a nation that clothed itself, now depends on foreigners to produce 97.5 percent of its clothing.

With every American purchasing an average of 64 garments per year, imports of clothing continue to surge. For the 12 months ending October 2015, the volume of imports increased by 5.5 percent, while the value of that clothing rose to \$84.5 billion.

Neoclassical, free-trade economists who have controlled American economic policy for decades believe that apparel manufacturing jobs are not worth keeping because they are low skill and low pay. It is okay to lose these jobs because they will be replaced by higher-skill, higher paying positions in the "knowledge economy."

- [Advanced Job Search](#)
- [Search by Category](#)



[Sixteen Case Studies On Lean Manufacturing From Manufacturing & Technology News](#)

But don't tell that to the people remaining in the U.S. apparel manufacturing industry.

"I would say that they have no business commenting on it if they are not in our sector," says fashion designer Bob Bland, CEO and Founder of Manufacture New York, the Brooklyn-based group trying to rebuild the New York City garment industry. "The amount of arrogance and privilege that comes across when academics or talking heads refer to industries that they know nothing about is part of the reason why it has been so hard to bring those industries back."

The jobs that remain in apparel manufacturing are not low skill or low pay. "The truth is in New York City alone, there are still 15,000 apparel manufacturing jobs and they are all supporting families and careers," says Bland. Workers spend 30 years in the industry, "which they wouldn't do if it wasn't a good industry," she adds. "And the fact that they are able to make a living and live in New York City during this time is a testament to the fact that these are good, middle-class jobs."

On a visit to Manufacture New York's headquarters in Brooklyn, MTN Editor Richard McCormack asked garment makers at the facility if they thought their jobs were low-skill and low-pay. "It is absolutely not true," replied Jaelyn Jordan, owner of Jaelyn Jordan New York, a designer and maker of wedding gowns, dresses and accessories. "Is it fun to make clothing? "Yes! Oh my gosh, I love it," she enthuses. "It gives you such a sense of purpose and a sense of pride to see something we have created come to life and make someone else feel and look amazing."

But free-trade agreements signed by the U.S. government over the past 20 years have "doomed our industries to domestic failure," says Bland. If NAFTA had not been signed "then we would still have Fruit of the Loom, Levi's, Nike and all of the fantastic brands being made here in the hundreds of thousands of volume, and we would have so many towns that would still be whole right now."

The Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is going to continue the downward spiral, says Bland. "TPP is going to gut American jobs. There is no real way around it. You can put all the spin you want around those agreements, but all they really do is benefit huge industry conglomerates."

There are tens of thousands of people who need decent jobs in industries that can provide them with fulfilling careers, Bland argues. Poverty in New York City is at a record high, impacting more than 30 percent of the population in some boroughs; and 56 percent of New Yorkers are having difficulty paying rent, with many falling deeper in arrears -- putting their monthly payment on credit cards -- as housing costs soar.

And among the thousands of millennials that reside in New York City, being a barista or working in the retail industry won't cut it once they start having families. There is not one neighborhood in the five boroughs of New York City where a worker making minimum wage can afford the rent.

"A lot of us already had crushing student debt that we were going to be paying off until we were 40 anyway," says Bland, 32. But after the financial sector collapse in 2008, it became apparent that there were "no real job prospects that would turn into careers."

Of the 2.8 million U.S. workers employed in the apparel industry, 90 percent work in retail selling foreign-made clothing. Retail is the second lowest paying of all American occupations, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retail provides workers with a median hourly wage of \$10.28, or \$21,390 per year, \$10 less per year than the country's lowest paying occupation -- home health aides.

It was shortly after the financial sector collapse that Bland, who had worked for corporate fashion giants Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger and the Banana Republic, started ManufactureNY. She says that for the sake of her daughter and the U.S. economy it is imperative to rebuild the fashion manufacturing industry that once employed 900,000 people in New York City.

"We need to ask ourselves this question," says Bland: "Do we really need cheap clothes as much as we need an economy that works?" She understands that Americans are overwhelmed by politics, social media and declining incomes -- and that it is difficult for Americans to justify spending more on American-made clothing. "But the truth is, it would save our economy if we were able to bring back the 40 percent of middle-class jobs that used to be associated with manufacturing and create them in a new way," she states.

The clothing industry is on the cusp of a transformational change, with the rise of smart clothing embedded with sensors and electronics, new digital production methods, the requirement for faster turnarounds, and a growing segment of the population that is becoming more aware of how their buying habits impact local and global workers.

"We have some incredible industries like the high-tech industry and Silicon Valley and if we apply those principles to the manufacturing industry and create a convergence around technological innovation and manufacturing, we could create a whole new set of manufacturing jobs that look nothing like what you historically thought of as a factory job," says Bland.

Is there a trend toward having American designers move production back to the United States, given that there is the need for smaller runs and faster turnarounds?

"It is a very long-term, slow-growing trend because contextually, it took only a few years after NAFTA to decimate the entire industry similar to a wrecking ball going through a building," she replies. "And it takes much longer to build it back up again. But there is a shift in lifestyles for millennials because it's not sexy or exciting for us to work at a computer. We were born and raised on computers, so there is nothing about the typical office job that is really appealing to us aside from the paycheck. A lot of folks my age and younger are looking at the making industry in a way that we can be more connected with our lives -- as a complete shift. Can we do

something meaningful that resonates with us and be able to make a living doing that? So manufacturing jobs, especially when you come from a sector like fashion or food where you already know how the bread is baked, suddenly look very appealing."

Despite a lot of media discussion about reshoring of foreign production back to the United States, the data do not support such a trend in the apparel industry. The number of factories in the United States making clothing reached an all-time low in the first quarter of 2015, at 6,993, down by more than 55 percent from 2001, when there were 15,622 U.S. apparel factories, according to the Quarterly Census on Employment and Wages. The number of employees at each factory fell from 28 per establishment in 2001 to less than 20 in 2015.

"Fast-fashion was one of the original disruptors of our industry over the past 10 to 15 years, with brands like H&M, Forever 21 and ZARA really flooding the market with really cheap and easy pieces that often fell apart after only a few wearings," says Bland. "Not only is this having a tremendously horrid effect on the environment and climate change but this is also a problem because we have a group of folks who are growing up on fast fashion and not realizing that it is literally too good to be true. It's too cheap for it to be ethical. What is resulting is we are having a lot of folks around the entire world working in very bad conditions like that at Rana Plaza," the garment factory in Bangladesh that collapsed in April 2013, killing 1,129 workers. "We shouldn't be having industrial disasters that are the all-time high in death counts in 2013, 2014 and 2015," says Bland. "That is just wrong."

"We are in a period of time in the fashion industry where GAP, J-Crew and Macy's and those middle-market brands are having trouble [figuring out] what next year looks like for them. This is an inflection point. We need to look and question every single basic operating principle of fashion and our global supply chain and give ourselves the opportunity to do things differently so that we can have a fiscally and environmentally sustainable supply chain and jobs for the next generation."

Americans are already buying less, she points out. Economists consider consumerism -- spending in the retail sector -- as being a key indicator of the economy's health. But this is a false measure, says Bland. "If we were truly to reinvest in a more insular economy, where there is local-for-local, where folks in the local community are working in jobs that then create business for other local businesses, then we could actually create a virtuous cycle again, where money was staying within communities and it would allow us not to have to consume endless amounts of product."

Does she think the country will get there? "I would kill myself if we didn't," she replies. "I would take my whole family and just go someplace nice. . . People need to feel like their lives have meaning and that their choices matter again. I know that if we work together, especially the middle class, we can do this."



[Free e-mail newsletter](#)

Provide us with [a comment](#) on this article.

We'll notify you as issues and free stories like this one appear on this site. [Sign up for a content-rich, e-mail newsletter.](#) (You will NEVER receive spam.)

Please [consider subscribing](#) to Manufacturing & Technology News. You will have access to all back issues dating to 1998, plus receive the current issue electronically and via regular mail. It is all original reporting on the most important stories facing U.S. industry. No advertising. The cost of a new subscription is \$495 per year.

---

[\[Home\]](#)

[Scan Back Issues](#) | [Comments](#) | [About Us](#) | [How To Order](#)

Reproduction Rights 2015 Are Granted To This Story So Long As A Link Is Provided To This Source Of Original Content.