

A letter from a former J.C. Penney worker

28 March 2013

The World Socialist Web Site received the following letter in response to “US retailer J.C. Penney cut 43,000 jobs last year.”

I briefly worked as a salesperson for J.C. Penney one holiday season over 10 years ago when my local economy was “booming.”

Despite that, I often worked hungry, subsisting on Christmas candy that floated around. At Thanksgiving we were given vouchers for a turkey discount at Safeway (useless to me when everything I made went to rent).

At Christmas we received superficial pats on the back: “Thanks for your hard work.”

Words are cheap.

I was told I could stay on in my job into the new year, but quit because my bosses reneged on a worthless promise of health care I had hoped most for.

J.C. Penney had a good reputation for immediately refunding unwanted merchandise, no questions asked. I was amused how many shoes would be sold on Fridays and return scuffed on Mondays.

I imagined that some people somewhere were at least having a good time. I wasn’t. I was often very sick and weary without anywhere to go for help.

Despite a vibrant and busy store—the number of our cashiers were already in remission, no doubt due to management’s need to cut costs and make remaining workers work harder.

Our executive manager, a tall man with blond hair who wore a tailored suit, would gather employees around him mornings before work.

Taking a lead from Home Depot practices (which were then the rage), he would evangelize and lead us into cheers with the goal of manufacturing a cheap esprit de corps amongst us.

Pointing to a remote check-out stand, he implored us to keep a sharp eye out “for the unusual” because a neighboring J.C. Penney outlet had recently been “hit”

by someone who had the chutzpah to impersonate being an employee in control of a register ... for an entire day!

Also, “look how easy it is to shoplift!” he told us, expertly pocketing a necklace from a counter swivel stand. “These little items add up so keep your eyes open!”

We all nervously looked at each other.

Lastly, the big boss implored us to push “the Card.” “We make most of our money from people who use our credit cards,” he confided to us. “Show them the ‘gifts’ and hand them the application clipboard. Don’t forget to smile!”

I saw then that J.C. Penney was not the company that it was when it was created by the stern looking person in the framed portrait hanging outside the break room. I am not surprised today that it, like other retail chains with long histories in American commerce, is failing.

It’s biggest (and most successful?) competitor today might actually be the questionably philanthropic Goodwill which sells the liquidations of other department stores (often at prices which would formerly have been the going rates—goods we all know are almost entirely made in sweatshops abroad).

Isn’t it amazing how non-profits like Goodwill can stay open longer and work their employees for less than the old mainstream businesses? They are a popular first stop for welfare to work participants—who graduate to ... ?

When I worked for J.C. Penney, I still wished to have positive thoughts about it. I admired the mysterious work ethic that appeared to drive many of my co-workers into accepting longer hours, increased demands, and chintzier rewards.

That ethic is less mysterious to me today, but I no less admire them. I wonder how many of my past acquaintances are simply still alive. Few of us were in great health then. Many of us huffed cigarettes in lieu of eating on our monitored breaks.

Naomi Spencer did not mention how one of J.C. Penney's recent marketing failures (that made headlines) was to alienate its core customers by circulating ads showing what appeared to be a post-traditional family headed by a same-sex couple.

I am not about to plumb the depths of reasoning associated with such campaigns which become ever more meaningless when the prices of the advertised goods consistently plummet.

There will always be someone somewhere who will wear a T-shirt with a logo left over from a public relations disaster on it ... if it is given away or sold cheaply enough (at a Goodwill).

Few analysts ever remark that what almost all ads have in common is "the Money Smile."

The Money Smile is the smile commercial photographers seek; it is the pay-off smile, or the smile that will make someone money.

It is the familiar look of ecstatic joy and well-being that decorates the backgrounds of our lives in the US characterized most by wet lips and bared teeth. It is a smile that suggests we can emulate its models who are invested in fulsome lifestyles, or in the right "things."

The Money Smile is Our Big Brother. It is especially curious at a visceral level when one considers how in nature, bared teeth normally indicate aggression. The Money Smile is everywhere and suggests omnipotence. It can be big, small, male, female, old, young, wise and foolish.

I like it best on the side of the little stick that separates groceries: you can spin it or even balance it on its end ...

Professional politicians today tend to clench their teeth into a frozen grimace when they smile. They can't afford not to—as they are being constantly watched and photographed—which is itself somewhat scary. I wonder what the effect of digital cameras everywhere is having on people.

My apologies for rambling off track here—but I get somewhat emotional when I recall the time I worked at J.C. Penney.

Growing up in the US, I did once believe in Henry Ford's idea that workers should be able to afford the cars they themselves make. It still sounds like a good idea in principle.

At J.C. Penney I could seldom (even with a discount) afford buying clothes which I needed to look

presentable on the sales floor—without going into deeper debt by using their credit card.

I feel somewhat amused that in spite of having only sporadic health care these many years since I worked at J.C. Penney I may myself physically outlast it. Small consolation on trips to Goodwill to compete with more and more others for odd clothing.

I learned yesterday that there will be no more human toll-takers on the Golden Gate Bridge (whose planners once aspired to make it a free public good). Capitalism is in crisis. Our oft-lauded efficiencies, which put so many people out of work and speed up others, are truly bizarre.

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