

**The Real Cost of That \$8.63 Polo Shirt**  
**Steve Lopez**  
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Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

I don't know about you, but when I read The Times' three-part series on how Wal-Mart does business in the U.S. and around the world, one figure in particular jumped out at me. It was in a section about how manufacturing and other jobs have been driven out of the United States as the discount chain chases cheap labor and supplies to the ends of the earth so it can provide shoppers absolute rock-bottom prices.

A mother named Isabel Reyes works 10 hours a day in a Honduras sweatshop, stitching fabric to make polo shirts. And the price to us, back here in the 'good old' U.S. of A., is \$8.63. Did I read that correctly - \$8.63? Is that the best Wal-Mart can do? Now wait a minute.

Because of the way Wal-Mart does business in America and beyond: A. Your Uncle Ed's factory went under and he's on the dole, B. A couple dozen merchants got rocked by the ripple effect, C. A nail was driven into the coffin that used to be a quaint downtown, D. That Honduran mom made \$7 for 10 hours of toil, F. Wal-Mart execs padded their mega-million-dollar portfolios, G. And our taxes are going up because Wal-Mart employees who can't afford health insurance are dragging themselves into the county emergency room.

If that's the cost to you and me and everyone else, that polo shirt ought to be \$5.99 and not a penny more, or we're being seriously ripped off. I went back and checked the section on Isabel Reyes to see if there's a way Wal-Mart can squeeze a little more production out of her, and sure enough, that laggard isn't pulling her weight. She sews sleeves onto roughly 1,200 shirts a day, and although her bosses keep cracking the whip, she wonders why there's no extra pay for additional work. Ten hours is 10 hours, Isabel. You're lucky to have a job at all.

Comprende?

I'll admit that others see it differently. "The unfortunate reality is that [some] corporations are preying on the desperate poverty of working people in other parts of the world, undermining worker rights, polluting the environment, and violating human rights based on the fact that they can get away with it," says UCLA labor researcher Kent Wong. What does he know? They say we're in deep, and there's no turning back. We don't need to slow down the Wal-Martization of the world, we need to speed it up. Take the 70,000 grocery workers walking picket lines in Southern California, trying to hold onto wage-and-benefit packages that pay \$ 10 more per hour than Wal-Mart. Who needs those annoying pickets, and who needs Ralphs and Vons and Albertsons when we've got Wal-Mart? They can all go under and nobody will miss them because Wal-Mart is charging into California with 40 Supercenters. A Supercenter, by the way, is the usual galactic Wal-Mart enormity, along with an equally colossal grocery section. If we all shop there, Wal-Mart will be able to buy in even higher volume,

and we'll all pay less. Would you believe \$1.19 for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes? Actually, I'd go for something a little healthier, because the one thing we all want to be lower than food prices is taxes.

As a result, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is proposing cuts in medical care, cuts for the disabled, foster children and the poor. On the up side, a can of soup could be as low as 28 cents. "Among all the industrial countries of the world, the U.S. has by far the largest gap between rich and poor," says UCLA's Wong, who just won't stop yammering about how the rich get richer and the bottom is dropping out of the middle class. Meanwhile, Los Angeles City Councilman Eric Garcetti is trying to set up roadblocks for when Sam Walton's boys ride into town to scout locations. Garcetti co-authored a proposed ordinance that aims to dictate location, grill Wal-Mart on its wage-and-benefits package and require an economic impact report. Forget that.

I'd like to know why a pair of pants has to be more than \$7. "I grew up in the Valley and remember talking with folks who said the GM in Van Nuys had the effect on local neighborhoods of lifting up wages for everybody," Garcetti said. "A super Wal-Mart has the opposite effect. It drags down wages for everybody." Who cares about wages? Our problem is high prices, not low wages. Back to Honduras, our friend Isabel Reyes said she can barely hold a pot handle or lift her child when she gets home from the factory after sewing all those polo shirts.

Maybe if you popped a few more of those anti-inflammatory drugs, you'd pull yourself together, Isabel. You think we got it easy here in the U.S., circling, circling, circling for a parking space so we can run in there and buy the polo shirt that keeps you in high cotton? Like the boss says, faster, faster, faster, because we need cheaper, cheaper, cheaper. As it is, that polo shirt is costing us a fortune.