Happy New year and welcome to your Action Update, where you can learn about how your donations and campaigning are making a difference.

Your campaigning has contributed to some great successes in the past several months. With your help we managed to get Matalan to pay compensation to garment workers injured in the Rana Plaza building collapse. The minimum wage in Cambodia also was increased by 28% after we campaigned for a living wage alongside Eam Rin, a garment worker and union leader from Cambodia, who came to the UK in September.

Thank you for your continued support – whether you stand with us outside shops, donate, send action cards, or fundraise for us, it all makes our work possible.

The Labour Behind the Label Team
Labour Behind the Label is a campaign that supports garment workers’ efforts worldwide to improve their working conditions.

We believe that everyone with a stake in the garment industry has a responsibility to improve working conditions – workers need to join together and demand better rights, consumers need to take ethics into account in the way that they shop and enter into dialogue with companies, governments need to step in and defend workers’ rights through legislation, and companies, especially the big brands at the top of the supply chain, need to be accountable to their workers.

We have four strategic aims:

- **We raise public awareness** and mobilise consumers, empowering them to make decisions about their purchases.
- **We pressure companies** to take responsibility for workers’ rights in the entirety of their supply chains.

- **We support workers** in their struggles for decent working conditions, including speaker tours and urgent appeals.
- **We campaign** for governments to take responsibility by legislating on corporate responsibility

We work together with similar campaigns across Europe and with partners in producer countries, through our members and the Clean Clothes Campaign, of which we are the UK platform.

“We believe that everyone with a stake in the garment industry has a responsibility to improve working conditions.”
In an East End classroom haphazardly loaded with year 10 pupils, every hand admits to owning an item of Adidas clothing. Some students have opinions on globalization, crafted during GCSE geography while others shift restlessly, relieved to be behind a desk. One person recalls the collapse of ‘that factory in Bangladesh’. Few think regularly about the people that make their clothes though. And certainly no one has ever met a garment worker.

Eam Rin is that garment worker and on the 14th of September she joined us for a four day Speaker Tour. A union activist, widow and mother of 5, Eam has sewn clothes for top brands including Adidas for 14 years. Leaving Cambodia for the very first time, Eam wanted British shoppers to hear first hand about the hardship she faces and the hopes she has for change.

The Speaker Tour took us to Willowfield Humanities College, the headquarters of UNISON and the TUC, Westminster, Ruskin College, BBC Broadcasting House, London’s Oxford St and Adidas’ HQ in Manchester.

“I make clothes for Adidas. We have campaigned for the government of Cambodia to raise the minimum wage but they have not done enough. I am here because I know Adidas will listen to their customers. By telling my story I hope people will join us in telling Adidas to invest more in Cambodia and to back a Living Wage.”

Originally just a person known for standing
up to management, around 10 years ago Eam was approached by the union at her factory to help organise her fellow workers. She quickly became union secretary, a role that takes courage in a country where government crackdowns on garment worker wage protests have left six dead this year.

Eam earns $100 a month and rents a single room, close to the factory, that she shares with 4 children. Eam sews the shoulders onto Adidas sports tops and on a good day she can sew four hundred sleeves. When the BBC sent Eam into Adidas’ glitzy flagship store she is at once shocked and entertained to find a tracksuit top that she is sure she has made.

“I had no idea that Adidas charged so much money for its clothes. Some of their clothes cost more than our entire monthly salary,” she said.

When you work ten hours a day, six days a week and produce around 200 tops every day that retail for 200 x your monthly salary – the injustice is laid plain.

It was an honour to host Eam and her translator Sammedy. As we tidy up after our workshop at Willowfield Humanities College, the form tutor asks pupils whether having heard Eam’s story they will think twice about buying Adidas clothing. As before but carrying greater significance, every single hand goes up. As 14 and 15 year olds it is unlikely that this was a simple act of obedience.

New wage announced for Cambodia after international protests

On 17 September, 100,000 workers in Cambodia took to the streets to demand an increase in their minimum wage to $177. Unions and activists around the world joined in solidarity street actions, from New Jersey, to Melbourn, to London where we demonstrated outside Adidas on Oxford Street.

As a result the Cambodian Wage Board came under pressure to make a significant boost to the $100 a month workers received. The new wage was announced this December as $128 a month – a 28% increase.

Although workers were pleased that the wage has at least gone up, this is a far cry from the $177 they say is an absolute minimum for survival for one person, and even further from the $394 a month the Asia Floor Wage predict is enough to support a family. Independent union C.CADWU is calling for brands to intervene and negotiate directly with the unions in Cambodia to agree and pay a Living Wage. The struggle continues.

You can check out a video of Eam’s reaction to the wage increase here: vimeo.com/113504555
Since April 2014 Labour Behind the Label has been working on a project funded by the UNISON International Development Fund to support two trade union federations to strengthen their organising programmes and provide more capacity to engage with the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building safety, a legally binding agreement to improve safety standards, signed by over 160 global brands and retailers.

Last October our Policy Director, Sam Maher, travelled to Bangladesh to meet with the trade unions and to learn more about the problems they face. Here we meet one of the federations supported by the project.

**Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers Federation (BRGWF)**

The BRGWF asked for support to open a new office in Gazipur, an industrial town in Bangladesh which has seen a surge in garment production in recent years. The project funds four organisers, training and rent for an office in the centre of town. We travelled to Gazipur to the see the new office and meet the four men and women who are attempting to organise the thousands of garment workers that have come into Gazipur in search of work.

Shamina Akter, who has been working for the union for three months, explained to us how they go about trying to organise the workers: “First we decide which factories we are going to target and then two of us (one male and one female) will go to the gates at lunch time and finishing time and hand out leaflets which explain the demands of the union. Some people just ignore us or tell us to go away, but some people stop and we can talk to them more about the problems in the factory. As we go back we approach those workers who seem most interested and ask them to tell us more about the issues they are facing and explain about how the union can help them. We give them numbers to call us on if they face any difficulties and invite them to come to our regular meetings on Friday.”

It’s not an easy job – there is zero tolerance of unions in the industry. Landlords, tea stall holders and local store holders are all recruited by the management to report any attempts to organise. Often workers leave the factories very late and organisers must wait until well into the evening to have even a chance to speak to workers. The union has different methods for trying to avoid such surveillance. “Sometimes
If we don’t reach out to people our union won’t get strong and the workers can’t benefit. If I just sit in my office they will never get to know me, they won’t ever feel comfortable to speak to me.
“Unions in Bangladesh face an uphill task in organising the 4 million garment workers that are employed in the industry. The power of the owners, combined with a government more than willing to turn a blind eye to attacks on union activists, make it a dangerous place.”

the workers will send messages to warn us if the managers are on their way out," explains Mobarak Khan, another of the organisers. “In some cases we work out where most of the workers are living and wait somewhere on their route home, or round corners out of sight of the factory”.

The organisers are clear that if they are to convince workers to come to the union they must prove that the union has something to offer. “Workers always ask us what the benefit is to them for joining the union” explained Ruma, a 19 year old organiser who cut her union teeth at the age of just 15, when she was employed as a garment worker. “We explain that the union here is to fight for you and to help you resolve your problems. We explain we can offer legal services, advice and support. This is where we have to start – by helping them to deal with their problems, only then will win their trust”.

Despite all the challenges the union is making quick progress. Within just four months they have managed to recruit enough members to start registering the union in three factories, in one factory over 70% of the workers have joined up. They have also started recruiting “solidarity members” in a large number of other factories – workers who have joined the federation, but where union membership is not yet strong enough in the work place to start forming factory based unions.

Ruma explains that their pro-active approach to organising is vital for this success. “This is for the workers' benefit” she explained. “If we don’t reach out to them our union won’t get strong and the workers can’t benefit. If I just sit in my office they will never get to know me, they won’t ever feel comfortable to speak to me”.

Unions in Bangladesh face an uphill task in organising the 4 million garment workers that are employed in the industry. The power of the owners, combined with a government more than willing to turn a blind eye to attacks on union activists, makes Bangladesh a dangerous place for unions. During our visit we heard numerous stories of workers being sacked, threatened, blacklisted and attacked. Yet there is an energy and determination among the unions to continue building their movement – in the end it is only through the efforts of organisations like BRGWF that the garment industry can change in Bangladesh.

The support of UNISON and its members has enabled unions to intensify their efforts and it is only through this kind of solidarity that we can really hope to make a difference.”
Take Action:
Send a postcard to Benetton

Benetton is the only international brand with confirmed links to the Rana Plaza factories which has refused to contribute a single penny to the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund. This is completely unacceptable when over five thousand people impacted by the disaster are waiting for compensation to allow them to get on with their lives, and the fund is still many millions of dollars short. Send a postcard today to call on Benetton to Pay Up!

You can request more postcards by emailing the office: info@labourbehindthelabel.org

BATH HALF MARATHON
1st March 2015

Sign up to run the Bath Half Marathon with Labour Behind the Label and be a part of our first ever half marathon team! Raise awareness and funds for Labour Behind the Label’s charitable activities

Register at labourbehindthelabel.org
Fifteen months after the Rana Plaza factory collapse, which killed 1,129 people and injured thousands, British retailer Matalan finally succumbed to pressure and gave an undisclosed amount to the UN Rana Plaza Compensation fund.

It was hard work, encompassing over a year of intense campaigning. The tipping point arrived in July, when we partnered with the organisation 38 degrees, and the campaign went into full throttle. Thousands of people bombarded Matalan with emails, phone calls, social media messages, shaking the Matalan bosses to their core. Activists handed in a petition at Matalan’s HQ with over 96,000 signatures. The petition was backed up by more than 15,000 tweets and Facebook posts, and over 2,000 phone calls. This firestorm of action thrust Matalan’s inexcusable behavior into the limelight, and Matalan realised they could no longer avoid addressing the issue at hand. On Friday, August 1, 2014, Matalan was added to the list of donors to the UN Rana Plaza Compensation Fund.

We want to express our enormous gratitude to each and every supporter who got involved in this campaign to get Matalan to pay up! Your actions proved – not just to Matalan, but also to the entire industry – that the UK public does care about the plight of workers who make their clothes. We also proved beyond a doubt that international solidarity works and the power of collective action can be unstoppable.

Of course, there is still a ton of work to do. Matalan’s donation is not yet sufficient, as we suspect that they gave less than £72,000, far short of the £3 million they were asked to contribute. We will continue to fight on until each and every person affected by the Rana Plaza tragedy receives full and fair compensation. However, it’s important to reiterate that we’ve shown through the Matalan Pay Up campaign, that we have the power to take on industry giants and win. ●

“We will continue to fight on until each and every person affected by the Rana Plaza tragedy receives full and fair compensation.”
Artists’ reactions to Rana Plaza

Since the tragedy of the Rana Plaza factory collapse in April 2013, many of our supporters have felt moved to respond to the tragedy through the medium of art.

Animator and artist Suzy Vickery produced a fantastic video animation for the song ‘Shopping Bags’ by the Australian duo The Worthy Skirmishes. You can download the song at worthyskirmishes.bandcamp.com/track/shopping-bags with all the proceeds going to Labour Behind the Label.

“Shopping Bags is our creative response to the collapse of the Rana Plaza building,” say the Worthy Skirmishes. “In the song we attempt to deal with the sense of responsibility and guilt we felt upon hearing about the tragedy. We aim to inspire reflection on our own roles as consumers in the global supply chain.”

Textile artist Alke Schmidt recently produced an exhibition ‘Tangled Yarns’ at the William Morris Gallery in London. Tangled Yarns looks at the history of textiles and the human costs involved, from the early days of the industrial revolution and the Lancashire Cotton Mills, right up to its modern role in Asia.

Each work examines a different episode in the industry’s complex and often brutal history, combining found fabrics with painting, stitch or print. In one work, each of the victims of Rana Plaza is represented by a sewing pin in a piece of fabric. The exhibition is open until January 25th and is free to enter.

Documentary makers The Rainbow Collective have also made Tears in the Fabric, a thirty-minute film about Rana Plaza. Rainbow Collective worked with Bangladesh Union the National Garment Workers Federation to make the film, which focuses on the survivors, a year after that event. You can watch the full-length film or just the trailer here. For upcoming showings please see their news and events page.
Many organisations, including unions, colleges and schools, choose to affiliate to Labour Behind the Label to show their support for the workers who make our clothes.

By affiliating with Labour Behind the Label these organisations directly support our work alongside over 250 unions and garment worker organisations – such as BRGWF – across the garment industry.

“Wolverhampton UNISON takes international issues seriously but also recognises the need for our members to see the relevance of those issues to them. In supporting Labour Behind the Label’s campaign to defend and promote the rights of garment workers (who produce much of our high street clothing), we believe we can engage our predominantly female membership in making the link as to “what has it got to do with us?” and support Labour Behind the Label in its direct contribution to international solidarity.”

Dave Auger, UNISON Deputy Branch Secretary

For an affiliation pack please email donate@labourbehindthelabel.org or call us on 0117 941 5844.