ACTION UPDATE

NUMBER 28

Supporting garment workers worldwide

LABOUR BEHIND THE LABEL

Welcome

In this issue you will find information on Bangladeshi garment workers' ongoing struggle for fair pay in the face of violent government repression, as well as an update on the future of the Accord and our concerns over worker safety. We share our findings on the dismal state of pay in the global garment industry with the launch of our new report: Tailored Wages UK 2019, and update you on our campaign for H&M to keep its promise and pay garment workers a living wage. This issue also takes a look at fast fashion and the environmental crisis, and contains information on how you can get involved with our campaigns and join our activist army. Thank you for your continued support – without you our work wouldn't be possible. Whether you stand with us outside shops, attend demonstrations, donate, send action cards or fundraise for us, it all helps to make change happen.

In solidarity,

Caroline, Dominique and Anna
The Labour Behind the Label Team

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Labour Behind the Label Limited supports garment workers' efforts worldwide to improve their working conditions. It is a not-for-profit cooperative company, registered in England No. 4173634. The Labour Behind the Label Trust is a separate organisation that raises funds for the organisation's charitable activities, registered charity number 1159356.

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Labour Behind the Label at a glance

Labour Behind the Label campaigns for garment workers' rights worldwide, supporting garment workers in their struggle to live in dignity and work in safety. We believe that everyone with a stake in the garment industry has a responsibility to improve 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 and must take action to ensure rights are upheld in their supply chains.

Mass arrests and safety threats in Bangladesh

Bangladesh offers clothing brands some of the lowest paid labour in the world, with garment workers earning less than a quarter of a living wage. Fearful of losing out to countries such as Ethiopia or Myanmar, where labour is even cheaper, the Bangladeshi government has resisted repeated demands from trade unions and workers to significantly increase the minimum wage. Intimidation and violent repression are deliberate tactics used by the government to foster an atmosphere of fear in order to keep workers compliant.

In December 2018, the government offered a wage increase that was only a fraction of the amount demanded by workers, taking the monthly minimum wage from 5,300 Taka to 8,000 Taka (approximately £74). This is only half of the 16,000 Taka called for by trade unions, and is nearly equal to the rate of inflation. For Bangladesh's 4.5 million garment workers such a pitiful raise represents very little in reality.

Thousands of workers took to the streets to protest and were met by rubber bullets and tear gas.

In January, thousands of workers took to the streets to protest and were met by rubber bullets and tear gas. One worker was killed and many more injured. Hundreds were arrested or lost their jobs, including 427 workers from Primark suppliers. 382 of these faced false charges brought by factory owners and were unable to get other jobs due to systematic blacklisting.

Primark has power here. It is a major buyer in Bangladesh, sourcing from 94 factories in the country. We organised a petition, which over 1,000 of you signed, demanding Primark publicly dispute the arrests and dismissals. Following delivery of the petition, we held a meeting with Primark's Controller of Ethical Trade and Sustainability. Primark reported that it has been investigating events at its suppliers and had asked for the reinstatement of dismissed workers, compensation for those who are not re-hired and the dropping of criminal charges. We are hopeful that Primark is taking a positive

Bangladesh

Demonstration outside the Bangladesh Embassy in London, January 2019

stance for its workers, however, we are still awaiting more details. Workers at Primark, Next and Marks & Spencer's factories are still facing criminal charges and we will continue to pressure brands to stand up for their workers.

The harsh response of the Bangladeshi government comes at a time when the world is watching, waiting to see what will happen concerning the ground-breaking Accord for Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (Accord). The legally-binding Accord was initiated following the devastating 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse and has been instrumental in saving many lives. It has conducted independent safety inspections of more than 1,600 factories, including over 7,000 follow-up inspections, and overseen more than 80,000 safety renovations, from replacing faulty electrics to installing fire doors or repairing structural damage.

After the Accord was renewed in 2018, it came under severe legal threat with multiple court hearings being scheduled to evict its operations from Bangladesh. Our campaign for its continuation included engaging with UK brands to push them to speak up in support of the Accord. We are pleased to share that on 19th May the Bangladeshi Supreme Court accepted a Memorandum of Understanding stipulating that the Accord will continue to operate for a transition period of 281 working days. During this time unions, brands and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association will establish a new institution which will take over the Accord's functions in 2020.

This is positive news, however there is a lack of clarity, especially in terms of how the Accord will remain independent and enforceable. With more power given to factory owners, and the exclusion of NGO watchdogs, we fear that the transparency that was key to the success of the Accord may be lost. It is vital that the new institution operates in a transparent and legally-binding way if it is to truly protect workers' safety, and give space for workers to defend their interests without fear of retaliation.

Campaigns on safety and repression in Bangladesh will continue this year. Go to our website to sign the latest petition: **labourbehindthelabel.org/get-involved/take-action**

New Report Shows Poverty Pay Still A Big Issue

Our new report, 'Tailored Wages UK 2019: The state of pay in the global garment industry', asks what 32 major high street brands are doing to address poverty pay. The answer is clear: not enough. Brands including Next, Zara, Primark, H&M, Nike and Boohoo were surveyed and not a single one could show that any of their workers in Asia, Africa, Central America or Eastern Europe were paid a living wage.

Brands are well aware that their workers live in poverty. 85% of those surveyed had made previous commitments to pay higher wages, enough to cover workers' basic needs, yet only 8 of the 32 brands were actually taking any steps to measure their pay versus workers' needs. Not a single brand had a clear, time-bound plan for how a living wage could be paid in their supplier network. Brands own codes of conduct appear to be worth little more than the paper they are printed on. If words do not transfer into action, they become nothing more than a smokescreen, a way to hide the truth from consumers.

In countries such as Romania, garment workers earn only a sixth of a living wage. The direct result is that workers are forced to live in poverty, dealing with slum housing, debt, malnutrition, untreated illnesses,

Not a single brand could show any workers in Asia, Africa, Central America or Eastern Europe were paid a living wage.

excessive overtime, and the inability to afford to send their children to school. The result is an ongoing cycle of poverty and desperation, all while working six or seven days per week, making clothes for brands who profit in the billions.

We are not asking for the impossible. Brands simply need to pick a credible living wage benchmark, tell their suppliers, raise their prices accordingly, and make their payroll records public so that we know it is happening. We will continue to push brands to end exploitation, to respect the workers who make their clothes, and to pay them enough to live in dignity.

Sign our petition to Boohoo and Amazon

Online fast fashion giants, Boohoo and Amazon, have failed to show that they have any policy relating to paying a living wage to the people who make their clothes. Let them know this is not good enough! Please sign and share our petition for a fairer fashion industry and a living wage for all workers:

labourbehindthelabel.org/boohoo-amazon-petition

Image © GMB Akash

Tailored Wages report results

32 companies assessed

84% of brands made a commitment to a living wage

Active support for Freedom of Association remained a low scoring issue with brands performing poorly in this area

8 brands are calculating whether the prices they pay to suppliers are sufficient to allow for workers to be paid a living wage

69% of brands disclosed some if not all of their supplier list

8 brands use specific benchmarks to measure if they are paying a living wage

12% of brands assessed disclosed some data about wages paid to workers at their suppliers

0 clear, time-bound plans for how a living wage can be paid in their supplier network

E Almost all brands received an **E grade**, showing no significant documented evidence of a Living Wage being paid to any workers

H&M's Broken Promise

H&M likes to portray itself as an ethical leader among garment brands, however this gives consumers the false impression that it treats garment workers with respect and pays them a living wage. In fact, not a single one of H&M's 1.6 million garment workers earns a living wage, with many workers unable to cover even their basic needs.
In 2013, H&M promised to pay a living wage to 850,000 of its garment workers, producing 60% of its clothing, by 2018. To date, and six months past its own deadline, H&M has profoundly failed to deliver on its promise. Our #TurnAroundH&M campaign included a petition signed by more than 179,000 people. This was delivered directly to Karl-Johan Persson, H&M's CEO, in May, ahead of H&M's annual general shareholders meeting (pictured). The CEO's grandfather founded the brand in 1947, and Persson himself has a net worth of €1.3 billion. H&M awarded its shareholders €1.6 billion in dividends this year - profits made off the backs of its garment workers. The inequality could not be clearer.
Our campaign took a remarkable step as Clean Clothes Campaign colleagues submitted a living wage shareholder proposal, putting poverty pay firmly on the agenda at H&M's annual general meeting. The proposal called for all the €1.6 billion in dividends to be paid into a fund for garment workers in order to bring their wages up to a living wage level. Unsurprisingly, the motion did not pass, with only 20 of the nearly 600 shareholders present voting to put people over profit. However, this is still a step worth celebrating as it highlighted H&M's hypocrisy and raised awareness among shareholders. We have shown H&M bosses that we have not forgotten their promise. It is high time they kept it.

We knew it already, but our supporters really are the best

Labour Behind the Label survives because of the support of people like you. We do not receive a single penny in corporate funding and we vow never to take money from the fashion industry, in order to ensure our impartiality and freedom to campaign. Quite simply, without generous donations from our supporters we would not exist.

We recently ran a fundraising appeal to sign up 25 new regular givers to support our campaign. The result? Honestly, we have been blown away with the response with 29 new sign ups. This means we now have 270 amazing individual givers who donate regularly and we hope to increase this over the next couple of years, allowing us to be sustainable and continue doing what we do. Every donation is valuable to us, and regular giving has an added bonus in that it allows us to forward-plan and budget. This security means that we are better placed to plan long-term campaigning strategies. If you are able to help our work by becoming a regular giver donating £10 per month, or whatever you can afford, you really will be making a difference.

We promise to put your money where it is most needed. Due to the nature of our work these priorities may shift a little, month on month. For example, you might be helping us to run an urgent action in cities across the UK, funding materials and travel costs. Or you may be enabling us to launch a new research project, giving towards staff and printing costs. Your donation may go towards our telephone line so that we are able to talk to journalists or our support of trade unions in producer countries. In short, your money will help our campaigning to be as strong and impactful as possible.

Please visit **www.labourbehindthelabel.org/donate** or email caroline@labourbehindthelabel.org if you are able to help us take on the fashion industry with a regular financial contribution.

Fast Fashion Costing The Earth

Fast fashion and the unsustainable nature of the industry is once again front-page news, thanks to the rise of environmental protest groups such as Extinction Rebellion and activists including Greta Thunberg. The continued exploitation of our world and its natural resources is not and has never been a sustainable process. The campaign to save our planet could not be more urgent. We must collectively re-imagine how the world operates, and this includes an entirely new approach to capitalist industries.

Such re-imagining is a vital step if we want to ensure our planet's survival, and social issues, concerning people as labour, must not be forgotten in these conversations. If we allow the focus to rest solely on (albeit vital) issues such as plasticpollution, use of non-recyclables, water use etc, we risk allowing companies to 'green wash' their image without embedding true and holistic change. In a bid to appear ethical, brands may jump upon practices that address only one of many concerns, and could leave their treatment of human labour out of the equation. A brand could be lauded as sustainable, even while their continued exploitation of labour goes unchallenged. We need to be wary of companies using activism as a marketing tool, and simply continuing as before but with a sprinkling of 'ethics' covering the worst of their practices.

The green economy must be a completely new approach, and one which ensures that fashion, a low-waged, labour-intensive and highly polluting industry, is overhauled in its entirety. By pushing for the human rights of garment workers to be upheld, we are pushing for a better industry and one that has higher safeguards for the environment. Change must be real and it must be holistic. Treating the earth with respect also means treating its people with respect.

Union busting in Sri Lanka and India

Recently we have been supporting garment workers at the rubber glove manufacturer ATG Ceylon in Sri Lanka, in a case of labour abuse and union busting. ATG is funded by British investors, and their Sri Lankan factory has a history of intimidating union members. On 17th January, factory workers went on strike following the arbitrary sacking of 5 leading trade union activists. International solidarity actions to support the striking workers included a petition signed by more than 6,000 signatories, which we delivered to the Sri Lankan High Commission in 13th March. Unfortunately the factory management refused to negotiate and began hiring temporary labour to replace the striking workers. On 26th March, the union called off the strike and most of the workers, including four of those originally fired, agreed to resign. They did, however, receive compensation payments that were twice those normally paid out in such circumstances.

We also have good news from a union busting case in India at a factory producing for Avery Dennison, whose labels can be found on clothes sold by most high street brands. 52 trade union members at the factory were sacked and Avery Dennison refused to enter into talks with trade unions. We maintained international pressure and are pleased to announce that, finally, Avery Dennison have agreed to enter into good faith negotiations with local unions. We will be closely monitoring these talks over the coming months to ensure that the company abides by its promise of constructive negotiation.

We are currently working on an ongoing dispute with garment workers in Turkey who are producing for Burberry, and we will update you on the progress in the next issue. In the mean time, we continue to stand in solidarity with garment workers worldwide.

Join Activism Near You

We are looking for motivated and dedicated people across the UK who can join regional hubs for people to come together, to share their passion and ideas and to help our campaigns reach further.

Becoming an key activist may involve coordinating local shop protests or stunts to raise awareness and get media attention; organising an event, public talk, fundraising clothes swap or film screening; or running a social media or letter-writing action group to put pressure on brands.

Whatever your ideas are, we are keen to have you involved. In particular there are hubs starting in Bristol, London, Manchester and Edinburgh.

If you could like to organise or take part in a campaign hub, get in touch with anna@labourbehindthelabel.org

Your voice can help amplify the demands of garment workers. Together we can make change happen.

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