



# ACTION UPDATE VOLUME #29

Supporting garment workers worldwide



# ACTION UPDATE WINTER 2019

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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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## Welcome

This issue gives you an overview of our latest campaigns to hold the garment industry to account. There is information on our sweatshop-free school uniforms campaign, calling on Trutex to operate with more transparency, a look at fast fashion giant Boohoo and poverty pay, and an update on the situation in Bangladesh and the violent repression of garment workers who protested peacefully for higher wages. There is also an update on some of our urgent appeals work, including campaigning for workers who produced for Burberry and Uniqlo to be paid the wages they are owed. Thank you for your continued support – without you our work wouldn't be possible. Whether you stand with us outside shops, attend demonstrations, donate, sign petitions or fundraise for us, it all helps to make change happen.

In solidarity,

Caroline, Dominique, Anna, Meg and Ilana  
The Labour Behind the Label Team

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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. ●

# Repression in Bangladesh

In our last Action Update we told you about the mass arrests and violent crackdown against garment workers in Bangladesh, with over 7,500 garment workers dismissed from their job and over 3,500 facing criminal charges following peaceful protests calling for a higher minimum wage. This includes charges against around 3000 'unnamed', which puts workers in a perilous position of not knowing if they have been charged or when they may be detained. Of those arrested or who lost their jobs, 427 were believed to have worked for Primark suppliers.

**Your voice has made a difference. Primark and Next, who had the biggest number of factories on the list, have both provided information and helped to push for charges against workers to be dropped**

We have been working to pressure UK brands to contact their suppliers and ask them to drop the charges against workers. Thousands of you signed our petition to Primark in May, asking them what action they were taking. Thank you for supporting

this campaign, your voice has made a difference. Primark and Next, who had the biggest number of factories on the list, have both provided information and helped to push for charges against workers to be dropped. Primark suspended new orders at all the factories affected and the factories had to provide evidence on eight different points, including showing that charges had been dropped and compensation paid to workers affected. We have been pushing Primark to ensure that their suppliers reinstate all workers who lost their jobs for peacefully exercising their rights, and Primark have stated that they have called for compensation for all the workers that were dismissed while producing for it and, in a few cases, got them reinstated. However, we are still awaiting the full figures and proof of compensation.

We are pleased to share some good news with you that at least two of the factory cases have been closed, meaning that factories (Hameen Factory group and Shin Shin Factory) have withdrawn their charges or asked the police to drop charges. More cases look likely to be dismissed as a result of our pressure on the brands. Exact numbers of workers affected are difficult to verify, partly because under

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Bangladeshi law, it is possible to charge a group of people without naming the individuals, a process typically used as a means of suppressing political opposition or dissenting voices.

There are still cases pending for hundreds of workers who are facing jail time for peacefully protesting, these

include workers producing for Arcadia, who own a host of brands including Topshop and Dorothy Perkins. We will continue to maintain the pressure on brands and hope that these are the first of many case withdrawals.

Since the violent crackdown we have had reports of continued sporadic cases of union busting in Bangladesh, including new cases of union harassment and dismissals of workers connected to a union at factories supplying UK brands. Garment workers in Bangladesh continue to fight for their rights, risking jail time or physical harm. We will continue to amplify their voice to UK brands. ●

Use the brand tracker to check the progress of all brands involved in the repression:  
[laborrights.org/2019-crackdown-your-favorite-brand-complicit](https://laborrights.org/2019-crackdown-your-favorite-brand-complicit)

Made in Bangladesh should not mean **#MadeInFear**



# Sweatshop-Free School Uniforms

In the run up to the new academic year, we launched our campaign for sweatshop-free school uniforms, calling on uniform brands to operate with greater transparency. More than £500 million is spent by parents and guardians in the annual back-to-school uniform and sportswear shopping spree. Branded school uniforms are a monopoly industry and schools commonly go against government guidelines concerning parental choice and price, which stipulate that they should not use exclusive single supplier contracts. This gives parents no control over whether to support a brand with dubious ethics.

Trutex, the UK's largest specialist school uniform brand, sells logoed uniforms and sportswear to thousands of schools across the UK. Trutex operates with very little transparency. It claims that "all Trutex products are manufactured in safe working conditions", yet it will not release any

information on its supplier factories. Our research indicates that Trutex source from factories in countries including Bangladesh and China, both known for their violent repression of garment workers rights. The only way to independently verify Trutex's claims, and ensure they are not simply an attempt to green-wash dirty practices, is through supply chain transparency. Trutex argue that 'competition' is its main barrier to disclosing its suppliers, however this argument doesn't stand up as many brands have already taken this step.

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We have been working with UNISON, the public service union, and with the National Education Union (NEU) on this campaign, as both unions have serious concerns about the monopoly of school uniform suppliers and the cost to parents, as well as ethical concerns about the transparency of the supply chain. We want to thank all who signed our petition asking Trutex to release its supplier list. We are pleased to let you know that Trutex have agreed to meet with us. We are hopeful that Trutex bosses will put their workers first, sign the Transparency Pledge and release their supplier list. ●



# Fig Leaf for Fashion

September 2019 saw the launch of the Clean Clothes Campaign's Fig Leaf for Fashion report, taking an in-depth look at the multi-billion pound corporate-controlled social auditing industry. The current checks in place in the global garment industry amount to voluntary initiatives, whereby brands employ external social auditing companies to fulfil their corporate social responsibility and due diligence. Many clothing brands point to their use of auditing companies as a sign that they are acting responsibly, however social auditing is merely a fig leaf covering the real issues. In reality, the primary focus of these companies is on protecting the reputation of the brands that pay them, rather than protecting garment workers' rights.

Ill-trained auditors take a checklist approach to factory safety and workers' rights, often not communicating directly with garment workers and therefore not hearing their concerns. Their approach is particularly ill-equipped to identify issues such as violations of freedom of association and gender-based violence.

Social auditing has become yet another cog in the global capitalist machine where making money is the number one priority and everything else, including workers lives, are secondary. Among the many notable failings of the industry is the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in 2013, where 1,134 workers were killed and thousands more left injured and traumatised. Prior to the collapse, brand-commissioned factory



audits failed to spot numerous safety defects and even stated that the building was of “good construction quality”. In the case of the Ali Enterprises factory fire in Pakistan, 2012, in which 250 workers died, the auditors reportedly never even visited the factory before approving it.

In order to ensure the safety of garment workers, it is vital that brands stop relying on corporate-controlled social auditing for their due diligence. There is an urgent need for binding legal mechanisms to hold brands accountable should they fail to act responsibly. Global fashion brands cannot be trusted to regulate themselves, and voluntary initiatives are not good enough. Time and again they have proven this, with deadly results. Read the full report here: [cleanclothes.org/file-repository/figleaf-for-fashion.pdf/view](https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/figleaf-for-fashion.pdf/view) ●

# Poverty Pay for Boohoo's Workers

British fast fashion giant Boohoo, one of the UK's largest online clothing stores, is projected to hit a turnover of £1.1 billion in 2019, and yet its garment workers earn poverty pay. Fast fashion is an industry based on the exploitation of people and the planet, and as such it is no big surprise to learn that Boohoo can provide no evidence

**In our recent brand survey, Tailored Wages UK 2019, Boohoo failed to show that it had any policy for ensuring the workers who make its clothes are paid enough to live with dignity and support a family**

that their garment workers earn a living wage. In our recent brand survey, Tailored Wages UK 2019, Boohoo failed to show that it had any policy for ensuring the workers who make its clothes are paid enough to live with dignity and support a family.

Unlike many of its competitors, nearly half of Boohoo's clothes are made in

the UK, predominantly in Leicester. The popularity of producing closer to home is due to increased shipping costs, making it cheaper, in some cases, to produce in Leicester than in Bangladesh. Leicester employs approximately 10,000 people in the garment industry, however the hub is increasingly being linked to bad labour practices. Boohoo's CEO, John Lyttle, has said: "small family-run factories now based in Leicester...have had a resurgence" with Boohoo using around 50 suppliers in the area at any one time. This may give the impression that wages are in line with the UK's minimum wage, however a 'Made in Britain' label does not guarantee garment workers are paid a living wage or work in safe conditions. Various recent investigations into the garment industry in Leicester, including by Channel 4 Dispatches, have highlighted sweatshop conditions and unsafe factories. Anecdotal evidence suggests that workers, typically women who speak very little English and are here on a six-month visa, earn as little as £1 per hour, with £3 per hour being the average wage.

Boohoo claim that they pay a minimum wage in the UK, however without providing any evidence of this it is difficult to verify their claims. So far, Boohoo have refused to release their factory supplier list, making it virtually impossible to check on the conditions that those producing their clothes work under. Supply chain transparency is vital. Not only will it help to uphold the rights of garment workers here in the UK as well as abroad, it will also help to secure the long-term future of UK production and ensure that the link between Leicester and bad labour practices gets broken.

As Black Friday approaches fast fashion brands will be selling huge amounts of stock at even lower prices, while their garment workers continue to earn poverty pay. Please join us this Black Friday in demanding that Boohoo sign the Transparency Pledge and disclose their supplier list, as well as publicly recognise that workers who make their clothes deserve to be paid a living wage. This commitment must be made clear in their supplier policies to take it past lip-service and into action. ●

A campaign poster for Boohoo? featuring a woman with blonde hair in a black lace dress, holding her finger to her lips in a 'shh' gesture. The background is red. Text on the poster includes: 'BOOHOO WON'T TELL US WHO MAKES THEIR CLOTHES...', 'SHHHHH!', 'Keeping supply chains secret hides illegal wages and exploitation in the fashion industry.', 'boowho?', and '#GoTransparent'.

### BooWho? It's time to #GoTransparent

How you can help:

- **Sign and share our petition** calling on Boohoo to publish its factory list: [labourbehindthelabel.org/Boohoo/](https://labourbehindthelabel.org/Boohoo/)
- **Send a postcard** to Boohoo CEO John Lyttle, asking why Boohoo is hiding who makes its clothes?
- **Take to social media** and let @boohoo know you want it to #GoTransparent. Keeping supply chains secret hides exploitation and illegal wages in the fashion industry.

# Burberry and Uniqlo – pay up!

We continue to work on a series of urgent cases around the world. These include a dispute in Turkey with garment workers producing for high-end British brand, Burberry. 41 workers lost their jobs when their factory, owned by an Irish company, closed down in 2016. The workers have still not been paid their final wages or any compensation. So far, no one is taking responsibility and, despite a court order to do so, the factory owners still have not paid what the workers are owed. Burberry also refuses to pay, even though the workers were producing Burberry products. We are campaigning to make sure the workers get the money they are owed.

We are also working on an on-going case against Uniqlo over the sudden 2015 closure of two Indonesian factories, which left thousands of workers, mostly women, unemployed and owed several months wages and severance pay. The factory closures, due to bankruptcy, were

a result of Uniqlo, their most significant buyer, withdrawing orders. Uniqlo states it has no legal obligation to pay these workers, many of whom are now destitute, yet the workers deserve to be paid!

**#PayUpUniqlo**

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Other new cases we are campaigning on include union busting in Myanmar where workers were fired for attempting to set up a union in a factory supplying clothing to Next and C&A, among other brands. We are currently working to get them reinstated. We will update you on the progress of these campaigns and any ways that you can help to ensure a fairer deal for garment workers. ●





# Will you support the women who make our clothes?

Imagine being paid 37p an hour to work in a sweltering factory with a boss who harasses you. Of course you attend a protest on the streets, asking only for a pay rise that will keep your family alive. Once on the march, you see a plume of greenish gas appear in front of you. It smells acidic, like vinegar. Your chest tightens, you can't breathe, your eyes burn and you can't run because your legs collapse underneath you. The police have used tear gas against you. Then you hear loud cracks, and the rubber bullets start to hit. One of your colleagues is fatally wounded. More fall injured around you.

That's what happened to fashion workers this year in Bangladesh. Thousands were arrested or lost their jobs, simply for daring to protest their low wages. 427 of them produced clothes for Primark.

Labour Behind the Label got straight on the phone to Primark and other big brands whose workers were being attacked. We organised a petition and a day of action. As a result, some workers got their jobs back,

and Primark paid compensation to others.

This kind of repression keeps happening. Changing the fashion industry won't happen overnight. We secure wins for workers for better wages and conditions, but a factory fire, building collapse or violent repression of workers could happen and our efforts need to be redirected. Our regular givers keep us going.

**To ensure LBL can continue to respond quickly and where we are needed most, your monthly support is vital.**

To ensure LBL can continue to respond quickly and where we are needed most, your monthly support is vital. It means we can plan and coordinate our efforts, and work towards long-term change that lasts.

A monthly gift of £10 could save more garment workers from police violence.

Sign up for a regular gift at [labourbehindthelabel.org/donate](https://labourbehindthelabel.org/donate) ●

# Join Our Activist Network

There is strength in numbers, and we are looking for motivated people to join our campaign to improve working conditions and empower workers in the global garment industry.

Activism takes lots of different forms and there are many ways to get involved, including: coordinating local shop protests or stunts to raise awareness and get media attention; speaking at events; hosting a clothes swap or film screening as a fundraising event; or running social media or letter-writing action groups to put pressure on brands.

Whatever your skills, strengths and interests are, there are ways that you can take action to amplify the demands of garment workers and tackle systemic exploitation in the garment industry.

**We are planning activist workshops in the coming months. If you are interested in joining a workshop, or an activist network, get in touch with [meg@labourbehindthelabel.org](mailto:meg@labourbehindthelabel.org).**

**Together we can make change happen.**

