

# **ACTION** UPDATE **VOLUME #32**



Supporting garment workers worldwide

# ACTION UPDATE SUMMER 2021

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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

It's now been over year since the shockwaves of Covid-19 have been felt globally, not least by those who make our clothes. Our #PayYourWorkers campaign is ongoing; brands are beginning many brands are agreeing to our demands and workers are being heard. In this issue you will also read about the need to continue the Bangladesh Accord and what we are doing to ensure this happens, and what you can do. We'll also give you an update with our UK work as well as how we have been working with UNISON to improve procurement practices for all workers including those who are LGBTQ. And finally, read a fundraising update and how we are continuing to build a strong organisation, thanks to you!  
In solidarity,

Angie, Anna, Caroline, Dominique and Meg –  
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. ●

# Amplifying workers demands during Covid-19

The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated inequalities in the garment industry. The pandemic has relentlessly hit garment worker communities with several waves of impact and workers have faced a toxic combination of factory closures, national lockdowns, cancelled orders from big brands, loss of wages and benefits, rising infections and unsafe working conditions.

After decades of paying factories the lowest prices possible, the initial reaction of global brands was to push the risks and the costs of the pandemic onto the workers who are least able to afford it- as they cancelled orders and left workers unpaid. We estimate that garment workers are owed at least US\$5.8 billion in unpaid wages from the first three months of the pandemic alone.

In the initial months of the pandemic, we joined activists across the world calling on brands to pay for all their orders in full, without imposing discounts on suppliers or delaying payments. Slowly but surely, many of the big brands agreed to our demands. However, the devastation caused by the pandemic, and by brands appalling behaviour is still rippling through garment worker communities.

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## Working towards an enforceable agreement on wages, severance and labour rights

Most garment production is carried out in countries where social protections and unemployment benefits are the weakest in the world. While many garment producing countries have some form of legal protections for workers who lose their jobs, they are widely accepted to be inadequate to meet even the basic needs of a worker and their family. Millions of garment workers are employed informally or on a contract basis which, in many cases, means that they have no access to social benefits, leaving them especially vulnerable to the economic ravages of the pandemic. Brands have also been using the pandemic as an excuse to repress workers' unions, eroding hard-won worker rights. Together with our partners in the CCC, we have launched the #PayYourWorkers campaign, which is endorsed by over 200 civil society organisations and trade unions. We are calling on all brands to take meaningful action to reduce the long-term vulnerabilities that garment workers face. The campaign calls for brands to:

- Pay the workers who make their clothes their full wages for the duration of the pandemic;
- Make sure workers are never again

left penniless if their factory goes bankrupt, by signing onto a negotiated severance guarantee fund; and

- Protect workers' right to organise and bargain collectively.

Since October, we have held two global weeks of action to target H&M, Primark, Nike, Next and Amazon. Activists in the UK joined a global community, amplifying the demands of workers protesting in countries across the world including Cambodia, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka.

We have had to be creative with our campaigning tactics during the lockdown, but have staged socially distant shop demonstrations highlighting the wages owed to workers, as well as stickering actions and phone-in actions to deliver the demands of protesting workers to the brands.

## Supporting equitable access to vaccines

In addition to wage theft, union busting, job insecurity and unpaid severance, garment workers and their communities are fighting a losing battle against the virus. Whilst many wealthy countries have implemented successful vaccine programmes, they have also been hoarding more vaccines than their populations need. There is a huge shortage of vaccines in low to middle-income countries.

Without intervention, garment workers and their communities will continue to be struck by new waves of Covid-19 infections, emerging new variants, national lockdowns and factory closures. This will prolong the crisis that we have seen take hold in the last year. The UK government is one of a



Image © FTZ & GSE Union

## The UK government is one of a handful of wealthy countries that is blocking a waiver on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) proposed by India and South Africa last year

handful of wealthy countries that is blocking a waiver on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) proposed by India and South Africa last year. The TRIPS Waiver would dramatically expand global capacity for the manufacture of vaccines, rapidly accelerating vaccination programmes in low to middle income countries. We have joined the People's Vaccine and support their demands for the TRIPS Waiver.

## Pay Your Workers: Protests and activism around the world

Workers in production countries including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia and Pakistan, have been joined by activists across the world in demanding that global brands respect workers rights to organise and bargain collectively, and commit to a binding agreement on wages and severance.

During the global week of action in March, the workers from Star garment factory in Katunayake, Sri Lanka rallied and addressed factory owners directly. The workers managed to secure a success as factory owners promised to pay them the back-wages that they had previously been denied. This success shows the power of collective action!

Here in the UK, activists took to the streets in London, Bristol, Manchester

and Warwick, staging socially distant demonstrations outside Nike, Next and Matalan stores, highlighting the brands' complicity in wage-theft over the pandemic with giant presentation cheques showing the \$5.8 billion in unpaid wages from the first three months of the pandemic alone. Activists also mobilised for a phone-in action to talk to Next about the plight of garment workers during the pandemic and ask what action Next was going to take to ensure that their workers were paid the wages and severance owed to them.

As a small team, our impact is magnified by the amazing network of activists who help to plan, organise and carry out actions and campaigning, and we couldn't be more grateful. We are currently working with the activist network to co-produce a new digital toolkit which will support new and seasoned change-makers at all stages of their activist journey. Thank you to everyone who has been involved in the process so far. ●



# We must #ProtectProgress

The Bangladesh garment industry has a long history of factory incidents. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, created after the Rana Plaza collapse of 2013, in which around 200 brands participate, has been working to make those factories into safe workplaces. Since its establishment, the Bangladesh Accord has brought great progress to the safety situation for over 2 million garment workers in Bangladesh, but this progress needs to be protected. The current agreement will run out by the end of May 2021.

The Bangladesh Accord is so successful because it is a legally binding agreement that has real punishments for brands, retailers, and factories who do not take enough action. However, this agreement runs out at the end of May this year.

LBL and the CCC network are pushing brands to sign another similar agreement to keep the Accord's most effective elements in place and support the expansion of the Accord so other countries will be covered by a similar programme.

Some brands and retailers, including UK brands like Next, want to see the Accord undermined by supporting a new agreement which will limit the worker representation, reduce the binding aspects of the Accord and make sure that brands are no longer held individually accountable.

So far only ASOS and Tchibo have come out in support of a new legally binding agreement which can act as a model for expansion. On 12 May 2021, UNI Global



Union and IndustriALL Global Union, the labour signatories of the Bangladesh Accord, stated their withdrawal from the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) in Bangladesh. The RSC was created by the Accord and the Bangladeshi garment industry through which the RSC agreed to assume all Accord staff, operations, and protocols with the understanding this would lead to a new legally binding agreement. However, once this agreement expires at the end of May, the RSC will lack a robust enforcement mechanism to ensure that brands meet their obligations and factories make reparations.

UNI and IndustriALL have stated they are willing to reconsider if brands sign a new agreement that continues the principles and obligations of the Accord and expands the principles and commitments to other countries. This is what we are now pushing for. ●

# Pride: Freedom, equality and justice for LGBTQ workers

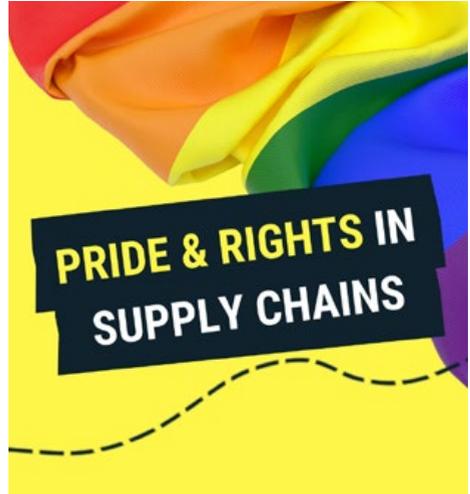
June is Pride month, and we stand in solidarity with queer & trans communities worldwide and wish everyone a happy & safe Pride! Alongside the celebrations, Pride is a protest- it is a time to organise and take action for freedom, equality and justice for LGBTQ people.

In the garment industry, big brands commodify Pride by selling rainbow t-shirts with slogans about equality, love & freedom to be yourself. But whilst brands cash in from Pride, what are they doing to support LGBTQ workers in their own supply chains?

We love to see visible support for LGBTQ communities. But queer solidarity requires action, not just words or slogans. If brands really support justice for queer and trans communities, they must uphold LGBTQ rights for all workers in their supply chains.

In the lead up to Pride events across the country, we have been working with Unison to help groups who are planning Pride events to make better purchasing decisions and to extend the values of equality and social justice through to the workers who make the products they buy.

Our impact goes beyond our immediate work. How we purchase garments or merchandise has a bearing on the human rights of workers across the world, including LGBTQ workers. We have developed a template procurement policy to help Pride groups take the first steps to ensure that the money they spend does



not support human rights violations such as modern-slavery, exploitation or child labour.

By taking active steps to improve our procurement practices, we can push for positive change within global supply chains, for all workers including those who are LGBTQ. This includes living wages, safe working environments and the right for workers to organise and join a trade union. We can also amplify workers' demands for non-discrimination policies to benefit LGBT+ workers, as well as those from other marginalised groups.

If you run a Pride event or would like to use the model procurement policy pack, please contact [meg@labourbehindthelabel.org](mailto:meg@labourbehindthelabel.org).

Read more at: [labourbehindthelabel.org/pride/](https://labourbehindthelabel.org/pride/) ●

# Our UK work develops

It is almost a year since our report - Boohoo & COVID-19: The people behind the profit – was published revealing the endemic underpayment of UK garment workers and the unsafe working conditions in Leicester garment factories. Since then, the government has set up (yet another) a new taskforce of government agencies to investigate the abuses. So far this has uncovered individual factory problems but fails to address the root causes of the problem.

LBL set out recommendations for brands and policy makers which targets these root causes – low pricing, poor purchasing practices and the power of big brands as well as the lack of union representation and worker voice in the UK industry.

In the autumn of last year we joined the Apparel and General Merchandise Public Private Protocol which was previously a talking shop for brands and enforcement agencies. This time however we see a chance to create a binding agreement which will address the need for worker

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Right now, we are discussing with brands, suppliers, NGOs and unions on the content of such a binding agreement. Brands are less willing to agree to a legally binding contract, but we know that without any binding sanctions and dispute resolution process any agreement will not achieve lasting change. In the next few months, we hope that we will either get such an agreement and get it signed or we will continue our struggle with our allies. As of now some progress has been made with local unions talking to several brands on union access to factories and support for a community centre in Leicester which is key to engaging with workers.

In our next update we hope to be able to share a successful outcome. If not, we will be asking for action from our supporters! ●

# 327 Regular Givers!

A year ago we set a target of 350 regular givers by early 2021, from 259. We didn't hit 350 but did surpass 300 and are now at 327! A huge thank you to everyone who has committed to our work and pledged to give monthly, you are truly inspiring. Our aim over the next 3-5 years is to continue building a strong and resilient organisation, so we can continue to be there for garment workers and push forward their demands.

Seeing change in the garment sector

is a slow process. Think about it – we are trying to redo a system which is completely entrenched in the capitalist system and has been normalised over time all around the globe as the fast fashion model that we see today.

Change doesn't happen overnight. However, we do see change through the work that we do and we can thank our supporters and regular givers for allowing us to do it. Without them, it wouldn't be possible. ●

**There are many different reasons why people give to LBL, but there are a few things that stood out to us when we reached out to our current regular givers recently:**

For me, supporting Labour Behind the Label is taking an active stand for a fashion industry which is just and safe for garment workers. We are all connected in the fashion system and I am intrinsically linked to those who have made my clothes each morning when I get dressed. I want a guarantee that the production of the clothes I'm wearing has only benefitted the individuals and communities who have been involved in producing them.

AMELIA TWINE, MAY 2021

I give regularly because it's becoming increasingly clear that being a consumer (of anything) has an ethical price tag attached to it. I don't give so that I can clear my conscience and buy whatever and whenever I please – I give in the hope that, in the future, the things on the shelves that we have the option to buy are fairer and more ethical for all.

ALAN, LBL SUPPORTER

**Will you become a human rights backer and give regularly to LBL so we can reform the fashion industry and protect the rights of those who make our clothes?**

You can join our current team of 327 givers by either:

**Online:** At [www.labourbehindthelabel.org/become-a-regular-giver](http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org/become-a-regular-giver)

**By post:** Complete the standing order form enclosed

**By phone:** Call 0117 954 8011 and have your bank details at the ready

# Six Items Challenge during a pandemic

If we're honest, we were unsure as to how this year would go – as we'd all be staying at home and in the same clothes anyway, but despite our concerns we saw 32 challengers take on our annual six items challenge event. Collectively they raised a huge £2,961.44 (including gift aid) for our campaigning work! Thank you to everyone who took part, we hope you found the challenge eye opening!

As part of this year's fundraiser we ran

a series of online events in March where more than 170 people joined us. Hosted by LBL and friends including Tansy Hoskins, who gave us an update on how Covid has affected garment workers over the past year, Mayisha Begum of @ohsoethical who gave us some great tips on how to be an online activist and Katrina Wilde who talked us through the natural dyeing process and giving new life to your old clothes. A huge thank you to Tansy, Mayisha and Katrina! ●



Images © Katrina Wilde



Want to join the Six Items Challenge team next year?  
Email [caroline@labourbehindthelabel.org](mailto:caroline@labourbehindthelabel.org)

**Become a human  
rights backer &  
give regularly**

**[labourbehindthelabel.org/become-a-regular-giver/](https://labourbehindthelabel.org/become-a-regular-giver/)**