Impact Report

2020/21

LABOUR BEHIND THE LABEL

Our Vision

A transformation of the distribution of power and value in the clothing industry, so that the rights of people at work and in the community are respected.

Our Mission

As part of the movement for global justice, we support garment workers' demands, through strategic actions aimed at those involved in the production, marketing and consumption of clothing.

About Labour Behind the Label

The garment industry turns over almost $3 Trillion a year. Yet garment workers, 80% of them women, work for poverty pay, earning as little as $21 a month.

Human rights abuses are systemic throughout the industry. Poverty wages, long hours, forced overtime, unsafe working conditions, sexual, physical and verbal abuse, repression of trade union rights and short-term contracts are all commonplace in the clothing industry. It is an industry built on exploitation and growing under a lack of transparency that makes holding brands accountable difficult. We are dedicated to changing this.

What we believe

Labour Behind the Label believes that no-one should live in poverty for the price of a cheap t-shirt. That a living wage is a basic human right, as is working without fear for your life. We are committed to making these ideals a reality in the garment industry.

What we do

We raise public awareness and promote collective action from consumers to push for change in the industry. We pressure companies to take responsibility for worker's rights throughout the entirety of their supply chains. We focus on UK brands – big and small – and global brands. We lobby and advocate for garment worker rights with the UK government and in producing countries.

How we do it

We work with trade unions and women's groups worldwide to amplify garment worker's demands. We lobby governments and policy makers to legislate and protect garment workers human rights. The focus of our work comes from garment workers themselves, and we provide a platform to amplify their voice and demands and to promote international solidarity. As the UK coordinating platform and partner of the Clean Clothes Campaign, we collaborate on global and local campaigns with a network of over 250 organisations.

Who we are

Labour Behind the Label is a not-for-profit company registered in England No. 4173634. Labour Behind the Label's charitable activities are funded by the Labour Behind the Label Trust, Registered charity number 1159356. We have a small team of five part-time staff. We are a worker cooperative with a horizontal structure that supports our fundamental principles of equality and empowerment. Our roles cover campaigning, media outreach, developing activism and networks, policy and advocacy as well fundraising, finance and admin.

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Thank You

As a small team, we would never be able to make the impact that we do without our huge network of supporters.

This year has been tough for everyone, as we have all struggled to come to terms with the impact that Covid-19 has had globally, as well as on our own day-to-day lives. To anyone who signed our petitions and taken action, read about and shared our work, donated, approved grants and supported us, your support is incredibly valued and appreciated, thank you.

To our funders

A huge thank you to the following funders who without their support, our work would be made more difficult to do: Joffe Charitable Trust, EU, CCC International Office, Thresholds, Solomons Charitable Trust, LUSH Charity Pot, Get Up Rise Up Direct Action Fund and UK Unions who choose to affiliate to our work.

To our activists

We are extremely grateful to all the activists in our activist network, who have stepped up to campaign for garment workers rights in these circumstances. Your creativity and enthusiasm have helped our campaigns reach new heights and make an impact.

To our regular givers and fundraisers

You provide us with long term stability meaning we can plan and coordinate our efforts, your ongoing support allows us to implement long term strategies which will effect change.

To our supporters

We can't do what we do without you. You are the torch bearers of our work and your advocacy means we can reach more people and make a bigger difference for those who make our clothes.

Key focus in 2020-2021

We have had a busy year this year, even more than usual.

A great deal of our work has been shifted to focus on the appalling negative impacts of Covid-19 – the virus itself as well as the resultant loss of wages, jobs, benefits and ongoing instability in the garment industry. You can read more about this work in the section below.

As we are responding to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, we are also working on new and emerging human rights violations in the garment industry.

There is unquestionable evidence that the fashion industry is profiting from and complicit in Uyghur forced labour in the Xinjiang region of China. We have joined over 180 organizations calling on apparel brands to exit the Uyghur Region and no longer collaborate or be linked to systematic forced labour.

We are responding to the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, by calling on brands to publicly condemn the coup, ensure that they do not have business or investment ties with the military and protect the workers in their supply chains. We have been lobbying for the release of trade union leaders including Daw Myo Aye, director of Solidarity Trade Union of Myanmar (STUM), and will continue to do this work.

The Covid-19 pandemic

This year has been an extremely tough one for garment workers globally.

Many workers have been hit by several waves of impact and have faced a toxic mixture of factory closures, national lockdowns, cancellation of orders by big brands, loss of wages and benefits, rising infections and unsafe working conditions.

The Covid-19 crisis has laid bare how broken garment supply chains are. After decades of paying factories the lowest prices possible, brands didn't hesitate to offload the main risks and costs of the crisis upon the people who are least able to pay it; the workers, by cancelling orders and leaving workers unpaid.

#PayUp

The first part of our campaigning around Covid, after ensuring safe working conditions, has been to make sure that brands honour their contracts. When Covid took grip across the world, brands responded by ending contracts or asking for huge discounts – often on goods that had already been produced or even supplied. We launched a petition with seven key demands and worked on getting some of the worst offenders to honour their contacts so workers could be paid.

Edinburgh Woollen Mill and Arcadia are notable cases where workers have been completely let down by brands. Others like Primark, initially cancelled orders but after months of public pressure finally agreed to pay in full for orders placed before the pandemic. The #PayUp campaign is estimated to have clawed back $22 million billion from brands. This success of the #PayUp campaign (even though much more is still owed) truly illustrates the power of activists and citizens to hold the fashion industry accountable.

#PayYour Workers

The average wage of a garment worker is less than three times the amount she and her family need to live with dignity. Workers are unable to accumulate savings and are often in debt. In spite of this, brands have failed to take meaningful action to improve the industry's poverty wages, much less ensure a living wage, while they continue to profit.

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Campaigning in 2020-21

31 activists engaged in organising group

4 petitions launched

6 op-eds published

22,792 signatures

Targeted major global brands including H&M & Amazon

Several cases raised with UK Ambassadors overseas

The current phase of our campaign is to ensure that workers in supply chains everywhere are getting their full wages and can access the severance pay that they are entitled to. We are also calling on brands to respect labour rights and uphold workers' rights to form a union.

- CCC research estimates that garment workers around the world are owed between 3.19 and 5.78 billion USD in wages for just the first three months of the pandemic. This wage gap, although based on only rough estimates, indicates that garment workers have been forced to pay the brunt of the pandemic. We have been pushing brands and retailers to commit to ensuring their workers wages are paid throughout the pandemic and beyond.
- 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 basis 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. We are pushing brands to commit to a negotiated severance guarantee fund, to ensure that workers will never again be left unemployed and penniless in a time of crisis.
- Workers can improve pay and working conditions through collective action. When factories started withholding workers' wages throughout the pandemic, the unions protested. But instead of listening to unions, many factories have found excuses to fire union leaders and silence the protests. We are calling on brands to respect labour rights and engage with worker unions.

Along with the CCC Network, we organised two Global Weeks of Action to urge H&M, Primark, Amazon, Nike and Next to ensure that the workers in their supply chains receive their full wages during the pandemic. Although we have celebrated numerous worker victories throughout the #PayYourWorkers campaign, we still have a long way to go.

Tackling exploitation in the UK garment industry

In June 2020, we published a report on Boohoo and the UK garment industry, after hearing increasing reports of unsafe working conditions during lockdown as well as massive wage theft and other labour rights abuses.

The UK garment industry is centred around a number of hubs. The largest is based in Leicester, with around 1,000-1,500 factory units. For several years, numerous media reports have detailed illegal practices in UK-based garment factories that are linked to big brands. The largest brand sourcing in Leicester is Boohoo and its sister brands which dominate the local industry. Wages as low as £2-3 per hour are allegedly commonplace in Leicester factories supplying Boohoo and other online retailers.

LBL worked in a coalition of groups to produce a series of recommendations to brands, the government and other enforcement agencies.

We are currently working in collaboration with a wide range of brands, and unions in developing a binding agreement which will ensure union access for workers in garment factories, hold brands to account for fair purchasing practices and pricing and support worker voice and protection when whistleblowing We hope this work will be complete in the summer, and that it will result in a groundbreaking agreement ensuring an end to the exploitation of UK workers and the root causes of this exploitations. We will continue to push brands to sign up to this and not settle for another voluntary (and meaningless) initiative.

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Living Wages and Transparency

Like other crises that have hit the garment industry in previous years, the pandemic has highlighted how fundamental it is to secure living wages and transparency in the industry.

Garment workers who are paid the bare minimum, have been pushed into destitution in the last year. At the same time, a lack of transparency from brands regarding production factories, and volumes of cancellations have hindered efforts to hold them to account.

Transparency Pledge

Several years ago, we launched a joint campaign asking brands and retailers to sign up to a Transparency Pledge. The objective of the Transparency Pledge is to help the garment industry reach a common minimum standard for supply chain disclosures by getting companies to publish standardized, meaningful information on all factories in the manufacturing phase of their supply chains. In 2020 we continued to push UK brands, including Boohoo to sign the Pledge, Boohoo still have so far failed to do so. However, in the spring, River Island signed and later in the year so did Missguided. As a result of our campaigning pressure however, Boohoo have now published their supplier list which is of course a step in the right direction however we still need to see them sign the transparency pledge.

Living Wages through Transparency

After much collaboration with our partners in the CCC the Fashion Checker website is now online. Eighteen organizations from the network have been working on this project for over a year now and will continue to campaign on the demands in the coming 2 years.

The Fashion Checker website shows which brands are paying a living wage and if their commitments on living wage are actually being done.

LBL's 'Out of the shadows' report brings data from the Fashion Checker transparency tool to life, detailing the stark contrast between fashion brands' big claims, and the reality of their supply chains. It shines a light on the poor work practices and poverty wages of the garment sector. The report found that despite their sweeping promises, none of the surveyed brands can prove that all workers in their supply chain earn a living wage.

Urgent Appeals

In 2020 LBL worked on over a dozen cases in Myanmar, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.

Most of the recent cases are linked to the massive impact of the covid-19 pandemic on garment workers – from the suppression of wages and non-payment of bonuses, the huge among of unpaid wages through lockdowns and the use of Covid-19 as a tool to repress freedom of association and worker organising.

More generally LBL, along with the CCC network has been monitoring the number of disputes and abuses in the world arising from the pandemic and producing a weekly blog highlighting these reports. Some of these cases are then taken up as Urgent Appeal cases while others are communicated to brands for follow up.

Advocacy in 2020-21

How many brands were engaged on cases, covid related policies, labour rights & International Accord = **25**

Number of detailed urgent appeals we worked on = **16**

Covid-19 related cases of factory closures & unpaid wages with UK and global brands raised by LBL = **200**

Roundtables where LBL engaged with brands and other stakeholders = **2**

Worker Wins

Thailand: Compensation for Burmese migrant workers

In November 2020 mainly Burmese migrant workers working in the Kanlayanee factory in Thailand making Starbucks aprons and Disney, NBCUniversal and Tesco products tried to organise after enduring 12 hours a day on illegally low wages. The factory management response was to close the factory leaving them with nothing. The workers were also blacklisted for being troublemakers, and many still haven't been able to find another job because of this.

The 26 Burmese migrant garment workers are legally owed 3.46 million Thai baht (approx. $110,000) in compensation for the exploitation they suffered while making products for Disney, NBC Universal, Starbucks, and Tesco.

Our campaign efforts and your support pushed Starbucks and Tesco's to commit to paying the compensation owed

Romania: Workers receive back-pay

After a group of workers received only a fraction of their normal wages, one woman worker made the abuses public. She published her payslip showing that she received only 140 EUR for a whole month of work instead of the current legal minimum wage of 278 EUR.

After being dismissed for speaking out, the case went viral and only after pressuring the European brands involved (including Ted Baker from the UK) a settlement was reached. Following the public campaign, workers at the Tanex factory all received their back wages.

Myanmar: Union members reinstated

In a clear case of union busting, 26 union members, including four union leaders, and 81 co-workers sympathetic to the union, were dismissed within days of the union officially registering in early May at the Huabo Times factory. Factory management justified the dismissals as a move to downsize in response to Covid-19, however prior to this, workers had been assured the factory would not need to retrench workers. A few weeks after the dismissals, management transferred workers from another factory to fulfil orders , showing that the factory was not downsizing.

The union members, supported by the CCC and CCC member organisations Let's Help Each Other and Solidarity Center, reached out to the main buyers: Inditex (Zara), Bestseller and Primark.

In August 2020, the union at the Huabo Times factory in Myanmar signed an agreement with the factory management committing to reinstate 26 union members and meet union demands. This sets a clear precedent for the success of worker organising.

Finances

LBL's overall income, including the Trust, has increased from £134,390 (19-20) to £173,623 (20-21).

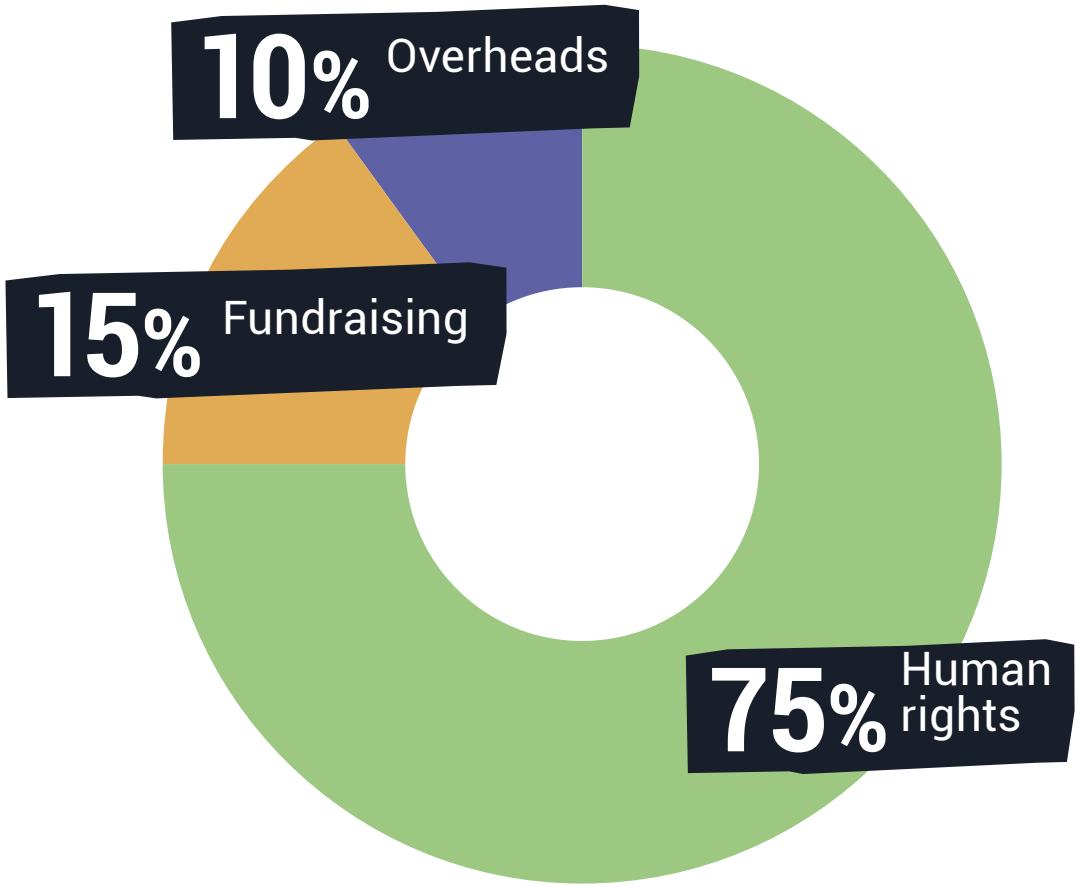
This increase of 29% has been a result of securing a number of grants to both LBL and LBL Trust and building our unrestricted income through regular and individual giving. With the increase in income this has allowed us to invest in building our staffing capacity. We have brought our Campaigns Manager Meg Lewis on permanently and recruited a Finance and Admin Officer.

Who finances LBL's work?

This year our work has been principally funded in equal parts by individuals – whether that's through one off or regular donations and grant funders.

We do not accept funds from brands or retailers or any Trusts affiliated to these groups. This is so we can remain impartial in our campaigning and policy work.

Our aim going forward is to continue to diversify our income and focus particularly on building our unrestricted income so we can become a financially stable and secure organisation. This will require focussed capacity from the team's fundraiser and possibly an initial outlay in costs to achieve long term sustainability.



Labour Behind the Label campaigns for garment workers'rights worldwide. We support garment workers' efforts toimprove their working conditions and change the fashionindustry for the better. We raise awareness, provideinformation and promote international solidarity betweenworkers and consumers.

We represent the Clean Clothes Campaign in the UK.

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