ACTION UPDATE

Volume #36

LABOUR BEHIND THE LABEL

Supporting garment workers worldwide

ACTION UPDATE

Summer 2023

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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.

LUSH FRESH HANDMADE COSMETICS

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Welcome

It's been an incredibly busy start to the year and we are excited to share it with you here. April was jam packed with lots of events co-organised by LBL to mark 10 years on from Rana Plaza. We have an update on Leicester for you as well as sharing some ways you can support us with our fundraising. Read about climate chaos in Bangladesh, women workers in Pakistan and the pressure activists are putting on adidas to pay their workers. We also welcome Maya (Advocacy Lead) and Alena (Campaigns Lead) to the LBL team!

In solidarity,

Alena, Angie, Anna, Caroline, Dominique, Kaenat, Kathryn & Maya
The Labour Behind the Label Team

In this issue

3 **Labour behind the Label at a glance**

4 **Rana plaza: 10 years on**

6 **Your support is everything**

7 **Leicester: latest update**

8 **Adidas**

9 **Climate change in Bangladesh**

11 **Women of Karachi rise up**

12 **Queer LBL**

Labour Behind the Label at a glance

Labour Behind the Label campaign for garment workers' rights worldwide, standing in solidarity with 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 act. Workers must join together and demand better rights.

Consumers need to use their power to enter into dialogue with companies. Governments need to defend workers' rights through legislation and increased wages. And of course companies, especially the big brands at the top of the supply chain, need to act to deliver rights and living wages at their supplier factories.

Rana Plaza survivors and unions lay wreaths 10 years on at the Rana Plaza site in Dhaka, Bangladesh. April 23, 2023.

Remember the dead and fight for the living

Rana Plaza 10 years on

24 April, 2023 marked 10 years since the Rana factory collapse in Bangladesh: a 'mass industrial homicide' which killed at least 1138 garment workers, mainly young women, and left thousands injured or bereaved.

It has been called a homicide by the Bangladeshi unions because the factory owner and brands could have prevented it. When cracks appeared in the Rana Plaza building everyone knew it was unsafe, yet despite workers' protests factory bosses, under pressure from global brands, forced workers to enter by threatening to dock wages. 10 years on from Rana Plaza, the fashion industry continues to drive a global race-to-the-bottom in working conditions, rewarding suppliers that pay poverty wages and suppressing trade union organising.

To mark the 10-year anniversary of Rana Plaza, we co-organised actions adding our voices to the workers around the world demanding: "Rana Plaza, Never Again,"

'Cost of Fashion' Oxford Street walking tour

On Sunday 23 April we took to the streets of central London to call out the fashion brands with blood on their hands. We denounced Primark, and United Colours of Benetton: brands that sourced from Rana Plaza, profiting from the conditions that led

 Image © **Angela Christofilou** aka **@protests_photos**

to the deadly disaster, yet dragged their feet on paying into the compensation fund for victims. We left commemorative plaques at Primark and Zara and laid wreaths outside United Colours of Benetton. We targeted brands Urban Outfitters and Levi's to demand they sign the International Accord, the only mechanism shown to improve factory safety – through enforceability, independent oversight and trade union power. Activists entered Levi's and occupied the store, voicing our demands. We ended our tour on the doorstep of Primark by honouring, in grief and in rage, the memory of the 1138 people killed, reading the names and ages of every worker whose life was stolen.

Remembering Rana Plaza in East London and Leicester

On Monday 24 April, we held community memorials in East London and Leicester. In East London at Altab Ali Park, Rainbow Collective had installed a memorial of 1138 clay hearts – one for each life stolen, hanging in front of a banner listing their names. Organisations and MPs laid wreaths and we heard about the tragedy and survivors' ongoing struggle for justice. We then went to Toynbee Hall, where Andrew O'Neill (No Sweat) spoke with Mayisha Begum (OhSoEthical) and Afzal Rahman (TUC) about workers' resistance in Bangladesh. In Leicester, trade unions, community groups, academics and a local MP gathered for an educational event, film screening and dinner.

Parliamentary Event

Our final event was in Parliament. We exhibited photographs by Bangladeshi photographer and activist Taslima Akhter and screened Rainbow Collective's film

'Rana Plaza 10 years on' through which Rana Plaza survivors addressed attendees directly. We then heard from MPs: Kerry McCarthy, Liz Twist, Rushanara Ali, Claudia Webbe and Rupa Huq. Mark Dearn from Corporate Justice Coalition called on MPs to support a new law on Business, Human Rights and the Environment and Hilary Marsh from Transform Trade encouraged MPs to support a Fashion Watchdog.
Ten MPs signed the Rana Plaza Book of Commitment to honour the 1138 people who lost their lives in the Rana Plaza disaster and show support for new rules to ensure safety and human rights in fashion supply chains. All MPs left with our Policy Briefing containing actions they can take to ensure a mass industrial homicide like Rana Plaza can never happen again.

TAKE ACTION

Sign the petition to call on the 'Dirty Dozen' brands to sign the International Accord **eko.org/Rana-Plaza/**

All events were co-organised with the Rana Plaza Solidarity Collective. For details of organisations and individuals involved see: **https://ranaplaza-solidarity.org**

Your support is everything

Big Give gives Big Wins!

Thanks to 114 incredible supporters and countless more who shared and spoke up about our campaign, we smashed our target and raised £11,180 for the Christmas Big Give appeal!
A huge thank you to everyone who supported us – without you our work would not have the impact it does.

The money raised will make sure we continue to do all we can in an industry that puts profit before people and planet. If we didn't exist, the link between workers and brands in the UK would be weakened, which would be disastrous for workers. Your support means we are able to speak up for garment workers and keep putting their demands to brands (and keep on pushing!).

Give monthly to ensure our work goes further

Can you give monthly to LBL? Supporting our work monthly gives us the strength that we need to continue doing what we do. It secures our work for months, years to come, which is what we need when the work we do takes time to make change.

We receive no corporate funding – this means we can stay objective. Help us stay that way by joining hundreds of other amazing changemakers. Please consider making a monthly contribution towards our work, whatever you can afford, it will be highly valued.

You can either join us:

- Online at **labourbehindthelabel.org/become-a-regular-giver**
- Or **complete the insert** inside this update, pop it in an envelope and send it back to us

Run the Bath Half Marathon!

15th October 2023

Run this iconic event for garment workers and support our campaigning work.
We have just 5 places, we'd love to welcome you on the team!

Sign up at: **labourbehindthelabel.org/get-involved/fundraise-for-us/bath-half**

LBL spoke at International Workers' Day, where, for the first time, a female garment worker also spoke openly and freely about her struggles at work.

Leicester faces 'Drastic Change' in the Garment Industry

In recent months we have seen brands cancelling orders in the UK, with factories in Leicester having to face closure. This is of course having a huge impact on workers. Not only are workers having their hours cut, from 40 hours to 20 hours a week but they are being given unfair dismissal, dismissal without pay or without ample notice.

This round of factory closures and lack of orders has particularly impacted women. LBL's Kaenat Issufo who is based in Leicester, has been speaking with women workers who face huge suffering and poverty. Women workers are reporting being dropped, having worked for 20+ years stitching our clothes. They are unable to find other work as the garment industry is all they have known. The language barrier makes it difficult for them to adjust in new environments; resistance from their husbands mean they cannot travel far or work in a place where there are several other men; and childcare responsibility often falls wholly on women limiting their employment options. Travel costs to other employment are often as high as 30% of their wages as most women do not drive or have a car. All this makes it difficult for women workers to find work locally without education/qualifications or speaking the language. The lack of work has caused issues at home with families becoming desperate, stressed and in poverty.

Workers have been telling LBL that they face a lack of support from people in authority, whilst unions are not able to get access to the factories meaning there is no legal support for the workers. Workers are also reporting that auditing is not strict enough and suppliers repeatedly get away with illegal activities. There is no presence or support by the council and the government with no strict penalties for the suppliers or anyone they are answerable to.

We need to see change now, progress is crucial. Education, training and development, union representatives, women's presence in leadership roles, advocacy support, health and safety are just some examples of the many needs raised by workers. Workers are demanding at a basic-level that every factory in Leicester to pay the National Minimum Wage to every worker, and that UK brands stop the factory closures by increasing orders in the UK rather than using countries abroad for cheap labour.

Adidas under pressure from Guerrilla ad campaign

On International Women's Day this year, activists hijacked multiple advertising spaces in bus stops in Bristol and Manchester to protest adidas 'woke-washing', and to call on the brand to respect workers' rights.

Although LBL take no responsibility for this unauthorised action (*wink), the campaign will no doubt have added to the pressure building on adidas to sign the Pay Your Workers agreement (see **payyourworkers.org** for background) with unions representing workers in their supply chain.

International Pay Your Workers campaign efforts in May also saw activists in Germany slip notes into the pockets of multiple adidas shareholders at their AGM, and launch a question about the wage theft, citing the $11.7 million in unpaid wages owed to workers from adidas suppliers in Cambodia alone. Worker unions in Pakistan, Cambodia and Bangladesh held protests at Adidas sourcing offices in the same week in support.

In further adidas news, Pride is coming this summer and adidas have already launched a Pride Collection to cash in on the 'pink pound' and boost their 'woke' image. While Adidas is not the only brand that hides behind their marketing, Adidas's pseudo-feminist and performative pro-queer messaging tries to position them an ethical leader. This isn't right. We are calling on adidas to actually support workers of all genders from the queer community, and sign an agreement with unions to commit to wages, severance pay and the freedom to organise for people in their factories.

Tell adidas to stop pink washing

This summer we will be calling on adidas to stop using the queer community's struggle to sell their clothes, and instead commit to stop wage theft in their factories. Join our actions on social media wherever you communicate and follow the instructions!

Climate change is already happening in Bangladesh

Climate chaos is already affecting the garment industry. Bangladesh, one of the world's top ten most low-lying nations, produces $38.73 billion worth of export clothing per year. The country faces huge climate risks from increasing heat, rising tides and flooding, and food insecurity linked to environmental change. The impacts of these environmental changes are already being felt. We asked garment workers in Bangladesh what they saw was happening and what they thought about the changing climate.

Migration

Esabnur, 32, migrated to Dhaka, after flooding from the Karatoa river destroyed his village and deluged farmland. "Once the floods start there is no work. The roads are flooded, so even if I was a rickshaw driver, I can't do that. Basically, at times of flooding we are out of work and income. I then had no choice but to come to the city. I am here because I lost everything during the floods. In our village 1000 homes were lost during the floods. Those 1000 people had no choice but to come to the city. Prior to the floods they didn't even recognise the city, they were happy in the village. So now because people are having to migrate to the city the city is getting too busy and populated. Most of them are coming here to work in the garment factories. These people have lost everything in the floods. They have to come. You travel to the city because there is work here." Esabnur now says he makes clothes for Walmart and UNIQLO.

Overpopulated, hot and polluted cities

Through migration, Dhaka's population has increased from 16 million to 23 million in the last 10 years, and is estimated to top

36 million by 2050. The influx of people has undoubtedly challenged Dhaka's infrastructure in supporting the growing population, with roads, schools, utilities, housing, waste services not sufficient for the growing population's needs.

Monira Begum, 30, lives in Ashulia in Dhaka and migrated to the city because of flooding in her home town. She spoke about pollution and waste issues she found when she reached the city, also linked to the garment factories: "What I have seen at the garments factory is that they dispose of waste under a local bridge. So when there is a flood this rubbish creates a horrible smell in the area." She spoke also about the risk of extreme heat, and the waste, causing local fires. "Every year because of the weather the fabric catches fire, then the local shops nearby catch fire and are destroyed," she said. "This is happening because of the cyclones and weather that we have. We don't get rainfall like we use to before. It's because the climate is getting hotter, this is even affecting the electricity supply in the city and that is making everyone's life harder."

Flooding

Fahima, 28, has a family of 6 people to support. Her family made the reluctant decision to move to the city a few years ago after regular destructive flooding of paddy fields made village life unmanageable. She now says she sews clothes for NEXT, M&S and Kmart. Fahima spoke about flooding of the roads in her district: "The area I live in now there are problems. We have a main road which is constantly getting flooded. The rain does that but also when it's not raining it still gets flooded. It's the road that connects us to the garments factory. Sometimes it's impossible to even use the road – the water is dirty and polluted. The factory and local businesses dump their liquids here. There is no decent system to get rid of this liquid waste. So that is why the road gets so dirty, polluted and floods so easily and it stays like that all year round."

Many people who work in the factories in Bangladesh have yet to learn about the causes of climate change, and who to blame for the impacts that are threatening their livelihoods. Yet the conversations carried out while collecting these stories show that they are witnessing first-hand the impacts – heat waves and devastating flooding that has caused many hundreds of thousands of people to migrate to the cities to work in the garment industry. Esabnur said: "What I know is that from the plants and trees comes oxygen. If we keep building and destroying greenery we take away that life source. This has an effect on all our daily lives."

Read full stories and watch videos of these workers at:
labourbehindthelabel.org/climate

Image © HBWWF

Women of Karachi rise up

Pakistan in crisis over inflation and factory closures

Women workers in Pakistan organised a huge rally this March to protest their treatment and call on the government and employers to act.

The rally was led by Home Based Women Workers Federation. Their general secretary Zehra Khan said that the capitalist economy has made the women 'wage slaves' and that the struggle for the freedom of women was a key part of the 'war against capitalist dominance'.

The ongoing economic crisis in Pakistan has badly affected the women and children. About 20 million women have been pushed beneath the poverty line and it is feared that 10 million more will join them by next year. Prices for daily use commodities have increased by 40%. Education, healthcare, electricity and gas expenses have increased from by 300%. Wages and employment opportunities have only decreased.

Amid this economic crisis, rally leaders spoke about the forced sacking of workers from factories and workplaces in the economic downturn, affecting mostly women. This means for many hundreds of thousands of women, opportunities to earn an income are diminishing fast. Rally leaders spoke about the conditions of women who do remain in work, calling them 'salaried slaves' denied their basic rights to permanent employment, minimum wage, weekly holiday, social security and pension. Sexual harassment was reported as common.

Of the brands, the women said they were working with local suppliers who are openly violating the labour laws. "Women workers are an easy target."

Labour Behind the Label are working on a project in collaboration with Home Based Women Workers Federation and other partners in Pakistan to support worker organising and legal routes to remedy in Pakistan. More to follow in the next edition.

Labour Behind the Label stands with queer workers around the world in our ongoing struggle for a world free from all forms of Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexphobia and Transphobia.

The struggle for queer liberation is inseparable from the struggle for workers' power and through collective action we will win!

Download Queer Labour Behind the Label from our website: bit.ly/LBLZine