

August 30, 2021

To: Governments and employers' organizations of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh
All apparel brands sourcing from Bangladesh and/or Sri Lanka

The current wave of Covid 19 and the spread of the Delta variant in South Asia is leading to a surge of severe illness and death in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In August, Bangladesh saw a 20% positive rate and its largest single day death toll to date, while Sri Lanka faced doubling infection and death rates.

As both countries are key exporters of garments, workers in the apparel industry, who have little access to medical infrastructure or vaccines, have been especially hard hit with little support if they fall ill. For economic reasons, the governments of both countries excluded garment workers from lockdown measures by categorizing them as essential workers; therefore, they must report to work in crowded factories where the virus can easily spread.

Despite constant calls from unions and international labour advocates since the beginning of the pandemic, neither national governments, nor local factory managers, nor international apparel brands that source from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have acted to provide workers with adequate occupational safety and health protections or social programs that would allow workers to stay home.

The failure to prioritize worker health and safety forces workers to choose between going into a factory without access to necessary PPE, with inadequate social distancing, and with minimal testing and vaccination or to face financial ruin without income or social benefits. It is untenable that Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi workers must choose between death and destitution.

As unions representing Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi workers and international labour advocates, we call on factory managers, national governments, and international apparel brands to coordinate to:

- Include the garment industry in lockdowns to protect citizens from Covid-19 and prevent garment production under the pretext of continuing essential services;
- Expand vaccination and testing of garment workers where workers are working or being recalled to work;

- Implement the ILO Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) protection standards and Worker Rights Consortium guidelines for effective infection control in garment factories, with special attention to personal protective equipment (PPE), physical distancing, right of removal from danger and worker participation mechanisms, and adaptation of transport systems where needed;
- Ensure that workers who are forced to be absent from work due to new Covid-19 restrictions continue to receive their full wage in line with the demands of the Pay Your Workers campaign;
- Allow workers to voluntarily refuse unsafe work and do not exclude those who stop working due to Covid-19 risks from unemployment, severance, or other economic rights and benefits during the crisis or penalize them with loss of contracts or work when the crisis subsides.

This means that:

- National governments must expand testing and vaccination of garment workers, enable quarantining, increase social distancing requirements for factories, therefore, reducing the percentage of workers allowed in each factory, and order that all workers be paid full wages during lockdowns. Additionally, governments should include the apparel sector in national lockdowns and apply the rules of their lockdowns equitably to protect garment workers during the pandemic.
- Apparel brands must extend lead times on orders during lockdowns to allow for the reduction in the workforce or temporary factory closures needed to keep workers safe. Brands must monitor their supplier factories to ensure, together with their suppliers, that workers who make their clothes can do so safely and that those workers who are prevented from coming to work to comply with safety measures are nevertheless paid in full. While this letter is focused on Bangladesh and Sri Lanka given the current immediate crisis, apparel brands need to do their due diligence by monitoring the safety and payment of workers during the pandemic in every country they source from, to ensure that workers do not have to risk their lives to complete brands' orders.
- Factory owners must comply with all new health mandates, including ensuring that workers have access to PPE and can work at a safe distance. All workers must be paid their full wages during lockdowns.

These steps are necessary actions that must be taken by international brands, national governments, and local factory managers to protect the lives and livelihoods of the workers whose labour they profit from.

As this is an urgent matter, we ask that you take immediate action to ensure the above steps are implemented without further delay.

Sincerely,

Sri Lanka

Ceylon Bank Employees' Union
Ceylon Federation of Trade Unions
Commercial & Industrial Workers Union
Dabindu Collective
Free Trade Zones & General Service Employees Union
National Union of Seafarers Sri Lanka/The Progress Union
Solidarity Center
Sri Lanka Nidahas Sewaka Sangamaya
StandUp Movement Lanka
United Federation of Labour
Women's Centre Sri Lanka

Bangladesh

Akota garment workers federation
Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS)
Bangladesh Garment & Industrial Workers' Federation (BGIWF)
Bangladesh Mukto Garment Sromik Union Federation (BIGUF)
Bangladesh Revolutionary Garments Workers Federation (BRGWF)
Garment Sramik Sonhoti Federation/Garment Workers Solidarity Federation (GSSF/GWSF)
National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF)

International civil society

ARGE WELTLÄDEN, Austria
Association of Conscious Consumers/Tudatos Vásárlók Egyesülete, Hungary
Campagna Abiti Puliti, Italy
CCK / Clean Clothes Kampagne Austria
Center for Policies, Initiatives and Research PLATFORMA, Moldova
Clean Clothes Campaign International Office

Clean Clothes Campaign Turkey
CNV Internationaal, Netherlands
Collective for Social Interventions, Bulgaria
Comhlamh, Ireland
Coordinamento nord sud del mondo, Italy
Corporate Accountability Lab
cum ratione, Germany
CUMW, Cambodia
Fair, Italy
Fair Action, Sweden
Fashion Revolution
FEMNET e.V.
Gender Alliance for Development Center, Albania
Gewerkschaft PRO-GE, Austria
GLOBAL 2000, Friends of the Earth Austria
Global Aktion, Denmark
Informationsgruppe Lateinamerika – IGLA, Germany
Kampagne für Saubere Kleidung, Germany
Labour behind the Label, UK
Labour Education Foundation, Pakistan
Maquila Solidarity Network
NaZemi, Czech Republic
No Sweat, UK
Open Gate - La Strada Macedonia
PayUpFashion Coalition, US
Project Cece, Netherlands
Public Eye, Switzerland
Remake, US
Schone Kleren Campagne, Netherlands
Sertac Sunman Export, Turkey
SOMO, Netherlands
Stitched Up Community Benefit Society, UK
Südwind, Austria
Traidcraft Exchange
UNI Global Union
UNISON, UK
United Steelworkers, Canada
WageIndicator Foundation

War on Want, UK

WORKERS ASSISTANCE CENTER, INC., Philippines

Worker Rights Consortium

Workers United – SEIU, US

Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association, Myanmar