**21 May 2019**

Labour Behind the Label has been reaching out to major UK brands sourcing from Bangladesh for the last few months. Some brands have responded quickly, while others, like Primark seem to only just be waking up to the crisis in freedom of association in Bangladesh.

The worst worker repression in over a decade swept through the country after the wage protests of December 2018 and January 2019. Factories have fired at least 7,500 (and possibly up to 11,600) garment workers and Bangladeshi police have arrested 65 workers on trumped up criminal charges, ranging from petty theft to attempted murder. At least 28 cases were filed targeting 435 named and 4667 unnamed garment workers – almost entirely by factories producing for major European and US brands.

Without intervention and remediation, this crisis will have broader chilling effects on the right of all garment workers to peacefully protest and organize. Apparel brands have immense influence in a country over 80% of whose exports is made up by ready-made garments.

Labour Behind the Label, along with our global partners in the Clean Clothes Campaign asked brands sourcing from Bangladesh to scrutinize their supply chain, making sure that freedom of association is respected in the factories they produce in. In particular we asked brands to

* require suppliers to immediately withdraw all criminal complaints they have filed related to the protests;
* require suppliers to reinstate the workers they have fired to the same level of seniority, with full back pay; and,
* express concern about this wave of repression to the government, highlighting support for workers’ rights to peaceful assembly and demonstration and calling for an immediate dropping of the charges.

However, out of these only one (Next) has so far provided a detailed response which includes details on how they have demanded the reinstatement of dismissed workers or failing that compensation, as well as asking suppliers to withdraw any criminal charges made.

The majority of these who replied (several have not bothered to reply) have focused their attention on the documentation we provided alongside the Worker Rights Consortium’s [latest report](https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Crackdown-on-Bangladesh.pdf), *Banning Hope: Bangladesh Garment Workers Seeking a Dollar an Hour Face Mass Firings, Violence, and False Arrests* which highlights several examples of specific factory cases.

Rather than taking the initiative and undertaking a thorough investigation of their own factories, some UK brands have so far only checked where and when they have been given specific factory names. We believe that brands should not rely on the efforts of local Bangladeshi partners and campaign groups like WRC and LBL to resolve issues in their supply chain but should be pro-actively and concretely assessing and investigating all their suppliers. They are the ones with the resources and the knowledge – as of now some key brands do not yet disclose their supplier list which makes it difficult to link them to specific factories.

To our knowledge none of the brands have contacted the Bangladesh government on this matter – highlighting how often expressed principles of adhering to freedom of expression and association can be words only.

We are [publicly tracking how connected brands are responding to the crackdown](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Ctmp%5Cmozilla_christie0%5Claborrights.org%5C2019crackdown) and also launched a [petition](http://labourbehindthelabel.org/primark-made-in-bangladesh-made-in-fear/?fbclid=IwAR16xmK7usDyqAlpRbDSV-_ler9Sbdvc7EOYaKU1we0pCNwBNTdVNlkcar8) after our information suggested that 427 workers from Primark suppliers in Bangladesh lost their jobs after taking part in the largely peaceful protests. 382 Primark workers are now reportedly facing false legal charges bought by factory owners and are unable to find other jobs due to systematic blacklisting.

Last month, Primark just opened their largest ever store in Birmingham. However, even as Primark grows and the profits roll in on the back of Bangladeshi workers’ efforts, Primark have not publicly disputed the arrests and the dismissals and are seemingly only now conducting an investigation.

While suspending orders can be a major tool in leveraging positive change, it should be done with caution and ideally in partnership with Bangladeshi trade unions, monitoring closely to check that action doesn't result in job losses or further retaliation against workers and suppression of their rights.

Furthermore, while [Bangladesh faces a factory safety crisis](https://cleanclothes.org/news/2019/05/21/questions-raised-after-agreement-reached-on-bangladesh-accord) as the Government of Bangladesh reconfigures the Bangladesh Accord on Factory Safety the Accord from the country, **Primark once again remained silent**. In the UK, only Tesco’s and Next bothered to make [public statements](https://cleanclothes.org/safety/brand-signatory-brands-speak-up-for-the-accord) supporting the Bangladesh Accord which is one of the very few concrete measures to emerge out of the rubble of the Rana Plaza tragedy. Despite expressions of support behind the scene, few brands put their money where their mouth is when it comes to really pushing international labour standards.

This episode shines a worrying light on the reality of UK brands – not just Primark - activities and commitments to improving worker rights in their supply chain. Once again, it suggests that the time has now come for mandatory legislated due diligence as opposed to a reliance on brand led voluntary principles.