

# Fixing Leicester's garment industry – one year on

Building partnerships,  
ending exploitation



*TUC, Unions, brands, Fast Forward, Highfields Centre & NGOs, Highfields Centre, Leicester, Summer 2021*



## Foreword

When the latest scandal surrounding Leicester's garment industry hit the headlines again in 2020 the TUC in the Midlands knew it was time for us to step up to the plate.

Scandal has dogged the industry for too long. And it's working people who suffer as a result.

But we don't want anger. We don't want grand standing. We want solutions.

Instead of exploitation we want good jobs, a thriving sector and an industry that Leicester can be proud of.

That's why the trade union movement across Leicester and the Midlands have rolled up our collective sleeves, reached out to brands, to politicians and to NGOs and the wider Leicester community in search of a better model for the industry.

We know we can't solve this on our own. But we know we've got a crucial role to play.

Let's build a better industry, together, that can bring success and better, safe jobs. That's our sole aim.

This is the story one year on. And we've not finished yet.

**Lee Barron**

*TUC Midlands Regional Secretary*

## Background

Questions regarding Leicester's garment trade hit the headlines during 2020 following speculation that conditions in local factories could have been a catalyst for the spike in Covid-19 cases in the city.

However, criminality and exploitative practices have been endemic for decades. It wasn't the first time an exposure of this nature has occurred. First and foremost, this is wrong and has rightly been exposed. But it also undermines the garment industry in Leicester more widely. It was clear and obvious to us that a new approach was needed. Some brands have largely pulled out of Leicester, or significantly scaled back operations, owing to the negative publicity and responsible factories are tarred with the same brush.

Brands tell us that they are looking at supply chain locations in the wake of Covid-19. There is a big opportunity for British factories to attract increased business if brands can be assured of ethical standards.

The TUC wanted to bring something different to the table and for that reason, along with Leicester City Council, convened a roundtable with leading UK fashion retailers on 29 September 2020 to explore a new model that places trade unions at the heart of a process to stamp out malpractice.

The roundtable agreed to take forward proposals through the Apparel and General Merchandising Public Private Protocol (AGM-PPP).

## Apparel & General Merchandise Public Private Protocol (AGM-PPP)

The AGM-PPP brings together retailers, unions, statutory agencies and NGO to explore improving the textile sector. Following the roundtable, the TUC formally proposed a new ground-breaking partnership approach that aims to put worker voice at the core of the industry and binds brands and unions together to drive up standards



*Sir Peter Soulsby Leicester City Mayor and Cllr Adam Clarke, Leicester Deputy Mayor visiting local factory*

A great deal of work was needed in the early stages to outline the union offer, demonstrate our commitment to the future of the sector and the role unions can play. Many of the key figures within the AGM-PPP process were not used to dealing with trade unions or understood how unions worked. Consequently, numerous presentations were provided to the whole group and individual conversations providing reassurance

that trade unions want the sector to be successful and how we can help deliver. A

successful, profitable textile sector in Leicester provides more jobs, better jobs, well paid jobs and not exploited workers.

As we know there is the very real threat of brands walking away from Leicester entirely resulting in thousands of job losses. So, clearly, not only do we want to end exploitation, we want to help save jobs, to grow jobs.

This process has taken time. But we have built a strong group of allies from NGO's, the local community and sympathetic brands. This alliance has been critical in building confidence and understanding amongst the wider sector and in helping to gain wider acceptance.

## Union access agreements

Through 'Workstream 1 – Worker Rights' of the AGM-PPP the TUC has proposed the adoption of 'Workplace Support Agreements' (WSA). At its heart a WSA is an agreement that brings together fashion brands, their suppliers and a union to guarantee workplace access for the union and a commitment from the union to represent individual and collective issues despite little or no membership.

The wording of the WSAs has been agreed in Workstream 1, despite the wider AGM-PPP still awaiting sign off. This has enabled the TUC and unions to start working with a group of brands who have already agreed to adopt WSAs. To date, we have commitment from **ASOS**, **Missguided** and **New Look** to implement with their Leicester supply chains.

What is novel is how these WSAs not only guarantee access for unions to recruit, to undertake Health and Safety inspections and to raise individual and collective issues with factory management, they leverage the purchasing power of brands (in the absence of a unionised workforce) to hold factory owners to account.

When unions identify issues, they will raise issues with the supplier as in any ordinary employer/union relationship.

However, if resolution is not possible, the union will work with the brand to bring the necessary influence to ensure appropriate action is taken –i.e. any future orders will be reliant on satisfactory resolution of the issues. Constructive working from the suppliers becomes, in effect, the smart business choice.

This is a tremendous step forward from those brands who have been willing to commit to WSAs before the whole AGM-PPP process is complete, and they deserve



GMB and Missguided at the Highfields Festival, Summer 2021

recognition and credit for their determination and commitment to drive change in Leicester.

It is a demonstrable break from the past.

Ultimately, at the end of the AGM-PPP process we hope all brands will be covered by WSAs via a binding accord. However, progress so far highlights those companies that are willing to work with us and exposes those who are less enthusiastic. There are no hiding places now.

As of today, the entire industry does not need to be tarred with the same brush when the next scandal arrives.

As ever, actions speak louder than words.

### **The view from brands**

#### **ASOS**

ASOS were one of the first brands to commit to new partnership working in general, and Workplace Support Agreements in particular. Simon Platts ASOS's Responsible Sourcing Director explains:

*"Freedom of association and collective bargaining are key to delivering positive change for people in the UK fashion manufacturing sector by ensuring good working conditions.*

*The Workplace Support Agreement that we've been working on over the past year is an innovative solution that builds awareness and understanding of the role of trade unions among workers and factories.*

*With the support of local community organisations, it will offer workers support and advice on employment rights, helping them to identify and resolve issues in the workplace."*

#### **New Look**

Sue Fairley, Head of Sourcing, Sustainability and Quality at New Look, states:

*"New Look has been working in Leicester for many years, and we have faced many challenges presented by working conditions which, in turn, has restricted our ability and willingness to produce in the city.*

*We continue to encourage and support innovative approaches being brought to the table to put workers at the heart of all operations in Leicester factories. As a committed member of the AGM-PPP and, in line with our Ethical Aims and the ETI's base code, we welcome the TUC and local trade unions' involvement through the Workplace Support Agreement.*

*We're excited to observe how the agreement develops and how it will enable factories to bring about positive, meaningful change, create healthier and happier workplaces and be of benefit to the wider community."*

## The view from unions

### Unite

*As a union we could not stand by and watch the exploitation of employees continue any longer and therefore we were extremely keen to get involved in the project.*



*Unite the union at the Highfields Festival, Summer 2021*

*Working with the brands has helped to unlock the door and given us the opportunity to meet and support the workforce.*

*This partnership approach is exciting and gives us the chance, after too many years, to tackle exploitation and ensure workers get a fair deal.*

### GMB

*One year on from the announcement that the unions, brands and the TUC are going to launch the Leicester Garment Workers Advice and Support Project to tackle the appalling working conditions within the Leicester garment and textile industry we find ourselves celebrating the headway that we have already made.*

*We are about to recruit two project workers to support the GMB and Unite unions to assist, support, encourage and educate not only the factory workers but the company owners to improve things.*

*The launch of the project at the Highfields centre in August was a huge success and welcomed by the local community and MP but we still have an enormous amount of work to do over the next two years to establish genuine lawful terms and conditions of employment for the workers in this industry.*

### What role for enforcement

The whole point of worker representation, delivered through WSAs, is to prevent exploitation and not rely on reactionary enforcement which often deters workers from making complaints. The workforce in the textile industry contains a great deal of vulnerable workers who are often fearful about speaking to state agencies and has mitigated against cases coming to the surface. As non-state actors, unions help to fill that space, build trust and get issues fixed.

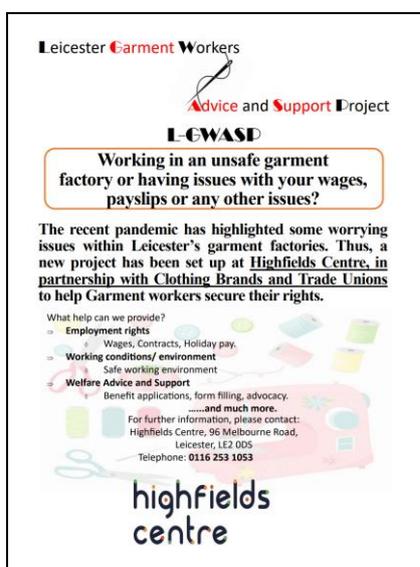
Nevertheless, this is not to say enforcement action isn't critical. It absolutely is and has a vital role to play. Moreover, we would argue they need more resources to support the work they

do. However, enforcement in and of itself does not prevent exploitation, only workplace representation will do that.

We envisage stronger workplace representation working hand in hand with enforcement agencies. Enforcement agencies can focus their resources on workplaces that have not committed to delivering worker representation. Trade unions and enforcement agencies would then have a symbiotic relationship, driving up standards and reducing the strain on statutory agencies.

## Community links

Over the past year it has become apparent that this complicated, thorny issue of exploitation and intimidation within this sector cannot be solved solely within the workplace. Differing communities within Leicester, build trust and secure safe spaces for exploited individuals.



L-GWASP project poster

To that end, the trade union movement (GMB, Unite, TUC), and nine fashion brands, have jointly funded two outreach workers to work within both the Highfields community and Leicester's textile factories.

Part of the remit of the community workers includes trade union organising. They will visit factories as part of the WSAs, with the support of unions, to help embed the principles of union organisation and to sign post issues and cases to unions who'll then be able to step in and address accordingly.

Interviews for the outreach workers are currently taking place and it is envisaged they will start work in November 2021. The Highfields Centre is a multi-purpose community education and development centre, located in the heart of the Greater Highfields area of Leicester.

Priya Thamotheram, Head of Centre at Highfields, states:

*"Over the last year, we have been engaged in the national Apparel and Garment Merchandise Public Private Protocol (AGM-PPP) forum which has taken on consideration of how best to respond to the long-standing and detrimental work conditions in the local garment industry, and which was nationally highlighted at the start of the Covid related lockdown early last year.*

*Those discussions have led to us forging very good links with TUC Midlands and through them to local trade unions, viz. GMB and Unite. This has resulted in us being funded on a joint basis between the unions and some clothing brands to set up a unique project for these workers – Leicester Garment Workers Advice and Support Project (L-GWASP).*

*We believe that L-GWASP will enable some of the long-standing concerns about what's been happening to garment workers in Leicester to be finally tackled, and this will be enhanced through the effective links we are forging with the unions, so that matters of remediation etc can be successfully followed up.*

*We are also delighted that the local Leicester and District Trades Council has also been very supportive of L-GWASP, and they are also represented on L-GWASP's Steering Group.*

## **Looking forward**

A lot of groundwork has been done over the last twelve months. But it is just that – groundwork. We are fully cognisant that turning around the garment industry in Leicester (and ultimately across the UK) will take years.

But trade unions are committed to the long haul. There is an expectation that funding for, at least, a second year for the outreach workers will be agreed. Yet, it is deeper than that. If we don't fix Leicester's garment industry there may not be an industry to fix. It is very much 'last chance saloon'. And that is why the chance to secure an industry wide, binding accord, that brings brands, unions, fashion brands, NGOs and statutory agencies together is such a golden opportunity. Discussions are ongoing but there is an expectation that we will achieve this landmark agreement in the foreseeable future.

And what an opportunity this presents for Leicester. Brands have walked from the city owing to reputational damage and increased sourcing from overseas. The footprint in Leicester is smaller today than it should be. It wouldn't take much for the whole industry to be moved overseas. But, as one brand told us, this doesn't end exploitation – it simply exports the same problems to Morocco, to Sri Lanka and so on.

This nettle really needs to be grasped. And it can be.

One brand has told us that if we are successful in Leicester, they would look to roll out this approach not just to the rest of the UK but globally. The stakes are that high.

With different agendas there is the chance to deliver real change. From brands wanting to avoid reputational damage, to suppliers wanting to show they are different to secure business, from the City Council wanting to promote the city and unions wanting to grow businesses, secure jobs and end exploitation there is a real confluence of interest.

It will just take time.

It is not easy. But it is doable. And it is right.

We've come a long way in a year and have a road map to progress. Now we get to work.