

GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

EXPLORING THE **CHALLENGES OF THE FASHION
INDUSTRY** THROUGH THE DOCUMENTARY
**OPEN SECRET, WHEREVER FASHION GOES
EXPLOITATION FOLLOWS**

SEPTEMBRE 2022

ach**ACT**

OPEN SECRET

WHEREVER FASHION GOES
EXPLOITATION FOLLOWS

CO-PRODUCED BY

ZiNTV
MÉDIA D'ACTION COLLECTIVE

achACT

IN COLLABORATION WITH



THE FILM

Documentary - 45 min - VO english
Filmed in Leicester, UK, 2021
CO-PRODUCTION achACT asbl - ZinTV

SYNOPSIS In 2020, in the midst of a health crisis, the Labour behind the Label organisation publishes a report and exposes the exploitation in the factories of Boohoo, the new online fashion giant, in Leicester, a historic city of the British textile industry. The disastrous working conditions in which nearly 10,000 people make these clothes are once again making headlines. The city's makeshift workshops are no secret. Will this latest scandal change things?

[WATCH THE TRAILER](#)

A DOCUMENTARY THAT ALLOWS US TO ...

UNDERSTAND A SYSTEM

- Dive into the business model of fast fashion companies, and the consequences for garment workers.
- Understand this model by learning about the purchasing practices of the fast fashion giants and their effects on workers' working conditions.

DECONSTRUCT A PRECONCEIVED NOTION

- Deconstruct the so-called "Made in Europe" fashion concept often promoted by companies as a guarantee of social and environmental responsibility,

CONSIDER THE FIGHT

- Meet organisations fighting against exploitation in the industry of fashion by discovering their means of resistance and struggle.
- Realise the importance of speaking out, the strength of a community and the patience required to get things done.

GUIDANCE DOCUMENT proposed by achACT asbl **EDITOR** Sanna Abdessalem-achACT asbl 2022 **GRAPHICS** Fabrizio De Barelli **PHOTOS** Denis Clérin-achACT asbl **PROOF READING** Zoé Dubois
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FÉDÉRATION
WALLONIE-BRUXELLES



LANDMARKS

LEICESTER, A HUB FOR GARMENT MANUFACTURING IN THE UK

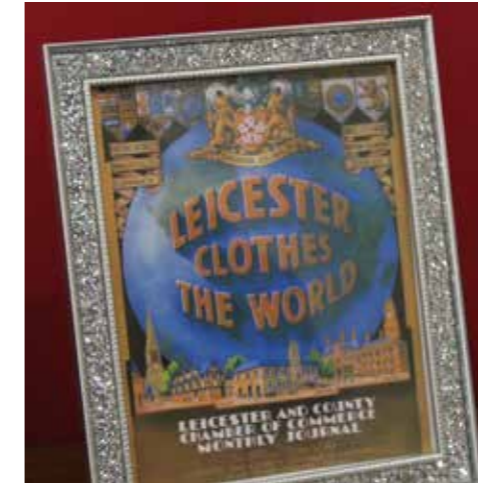
Leicester is a city in central England with a population of approximately 324,000.

Historically, Leicester has stood out for the success of its industries, notably hosiery and footwear. In 1936, the city was recognised as the second richest in Europe due to its booming textile industry. The slogan "Leicester clothes the world" appeared in the mid-2000s and confirmed Leicester's leading position in the garment market.

Gradually, Leicester's larger production factories gave way to a myriad of small garment workshops.

Today, between 1,000 and 1,500 production units are registered there¹. The number of people working in the garment industry in Leicester is estimated at 10,000 people. Most of the workers working in the garment industry in Leicester are from minority ethnic groups, and about a third of them were born outside the UK. They are particularly vulnerable

¹<https://labourbehindthelabel.org/uk-garment-industry/>



to abuse because of their immigration status, language barriers and difficulties in accessing state support systems. Leicester's workshops predominantly supply low-cost online clothing companies, such as Boohoo.

While the working conditions for Leicester garment workers have been known for several years, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problems. In June 2020, Leicester appeared in red on maps showing the spread of the Coronavirus. The city alone accounted for 10% of cases from all over the country. One of

the reasons was that the garment factories were running at full capacity despite the lockdown, and the workers, who were forced to work, had no health protection.

Leicester came back into the headlines. The extreme working conditions, driven by a small handful of online fast-fashion companies making a killing in the midst of a global health crisis, were brought into the spotlight.

This latest scandal gave Labour Behind the Label the opportunity to publish a report exposing a secret that was no secret: in the middle of the UK, in the heart of Europe, several thousand people are being exploited in a way that one could not imagine.

'Open Secret – wherever fashion goes exploitation follows', takes a look at the collective work that followed these events. What are the issues for garment workers in Leicester? Whose responsibility must be strengthened? By whom and how can the struggle to improve conditions be organised? How can we improve working conditions?

LEICESTER



LANDMARKS

WHO APPEARS IN THE DOCUMENTARY?

FASHION BRANDS AND RETAILERS

In the documentary, the e-commerce company Boohoo is singled out. It is a British online clothing retailer, founded in 2006. Its turnover increased by 73% during the pandemic to reach 1.14 billion euros in October 2021!² Before the pandemic, the Boohoo Group Ltd (Boohoo, PrettyLittleThing, etc.) accounted for 75-80% of Leicester's production output! At the same time, the company subcontracted about 60-70% of its orders to Leicester. During the crisis, this percentage would have even increased to about 80%. In the summer of 2020, at the height of the pan-European period, Boohoo was the subject of a report by the British organisation Labour behind the label, which denounced the working conditions in its supply chains: extremely

low salaries, deplorable health and safety conditions for workers, failure to comply with the health measures in force, etc. Other UK fast fashion online retailers source from Leicester and produce under similar conditions. These companies are particularly opaque about their suppliers. Using the example of Boohoo, the documentary provides an insight into the economic model on which these companies operate.

²<https://fashionunited.fr/actualite/business/boohoo-progresse-a-pas-de-geant/2021100428074>

SUPPLIERS, SUBCONTRACTORS OF FASHION BRANDS AND RETAILERS

Brands and retailers no longer manufacture anything themselves, they subcontract the clothes they sell. In Leicester, this is a major industry, with over 1,000 garment manufacturing sites, not including home-based work. As described in the documentary, most factories in Leicester are small workshops, often housed in dilapidated buildings with little investment in building security, ventilation, fire prevention, etc. These factories mainly provide a wide range of services to the local population. These workshops mainly supply fast fashion companies selling online. The subcontractors are the direct employers of the thousands of garment workers.

In a particularly competitive sector, fashion brands and subcontractors are bound by orders and commercial contracts. Many of these have tight delivery times with narrow budget margins. This leads to the systemic exploitation of the workers who sew the garments.

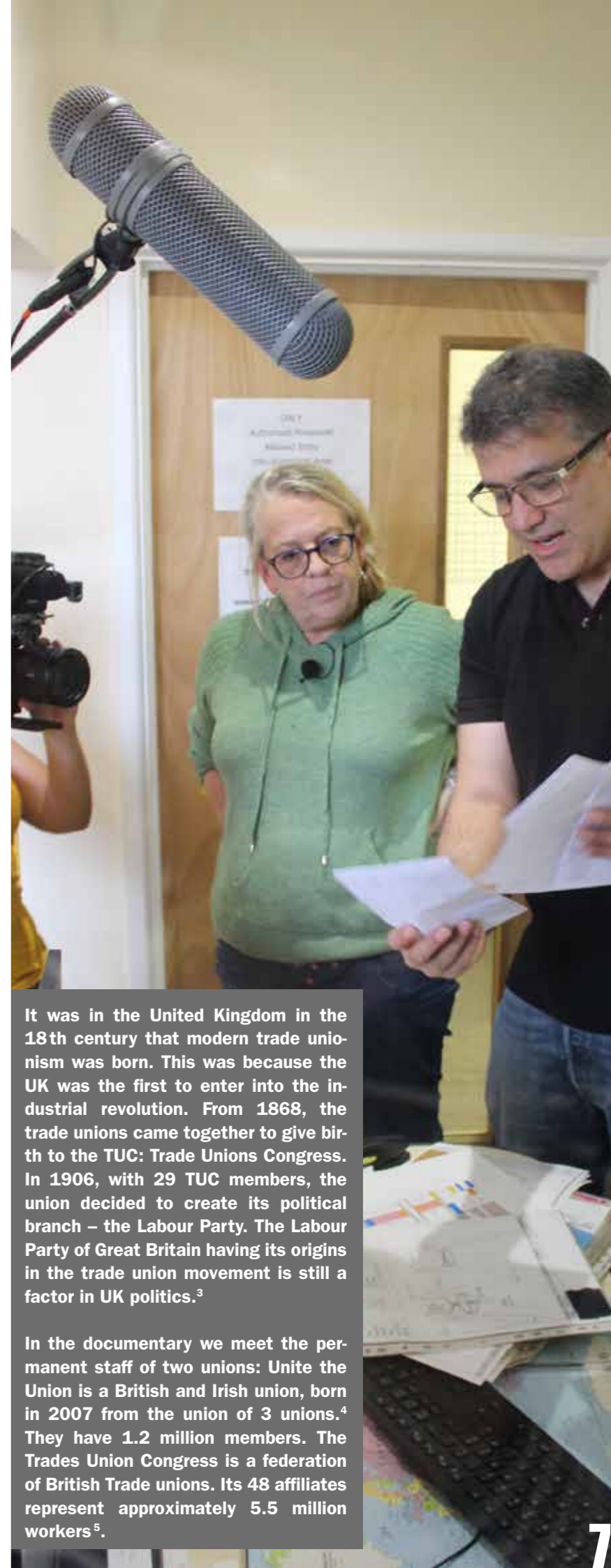
THE UNIONS

Trade unions defend the interests of employees collectively and individually, at national and company level. In the documentary, the unions appear through archive footage at the beginning of the film, followed by interviews with representatives from Unite the Union and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). The film shows that, after a period of absence, trade union organisations are once again involved in issues relating to working conditions in the textile production in Leicester. Several agreements are being negotiated, notably with fashion brands and retailers. Their aim is to ensure that unions have access to the factory floor and to the people who work there. Without this access, their work of organising and supporting workers is impossible.

³<https://www.force-ouvriere.fr/le-syndicalisme-britannique>

⁴The union of Amicus and the General and Transport Workers Union. It is the largest union in the UK and in Ireland. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unite_the_Union

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trades_Union_Congress



It was in the United Kingdom in the 18th century that modern trade unionism was born. This was because the UK was the first to enter into the industrial revolution. From 1868, the trade unions came together to give birth to the TUC: Trade Unions Congress. In 1906, with 29 TUC members, the union decided to create its political branch – the Labour Party. The Labour Party of Great Britain having its origins in the trade union movement is still a factor in UK politics.³

In the documentary we meet the permanent staff of two unions: Unite the Union is a British and Irish union, born in 2007 from the union of 3 unions.⁴ They have 1.2 million members. The Trades Union Congress is a federation of British Trade unions. Its 48 affiliates represent approximately 5.5 million workers⁵.





THE STATE

If the state is absent from the documentary, it is also absent from the struggles of Leicester workers. The lack of inspections in factories and migration policies are mentioned in the documentary. The documentary also discusses the lack of regulation of corporate accountability. In the UK, as in Belgium, the government does not (yet) have a binding legislative

The UK's wealth comes mainly from industry and trade. The country has, in part, built its prosperity on manufacturing and heavy industry. A productive capacity supported by the presence of coal, mechanised enterprises and the existence of a vast colonial empire made the United Kingdom the world leading power.

The important presence of a textile sector in the UK was also built on exploitation and colonisation. In the 18th and 19th centuries, India, including present-day Bangladesh, exported high quality textile products to Europe, especially to England, which was largely deficient in textiles. The British Indian Empire deliberately destroyed the Indian textile manufacturing sector for the benefit of the English factories by political and military means as well as by administrative and tariff measures.⁶

tool to hold companies accountable for human rights violations in their supply chains.

THE HIGHFIELDS COMMUNITY CENTRE

A community centre is a place that serves as a rallying point for a group or community to provide support, social connection, information, training, cultural activities, access to digital communication services, etc. It can sometimes also provide frontline health services.

The Highfields Centre opened in 1974 as an urban community centre. It is located in the Leicester district of the same name, Highfields, in the heart of a diverse community. Many garment workers from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh live in the area and benefit from the frontline services offered by the centre. This proximity gives the centre a privileged knowledge of, and access to, the problems experienced by the workers and their families. In the documentary we meet Priya Thamotheram, director of the centre, who recalls the importance of the community dimension in organising solidarity and struggle.

⁶ <https://www.ranaplaza.be/precarisation.php>



LANDMARKS

"FASHION - WORKERS ADVICE BUREAU - LEICESTER" (FAB - L)

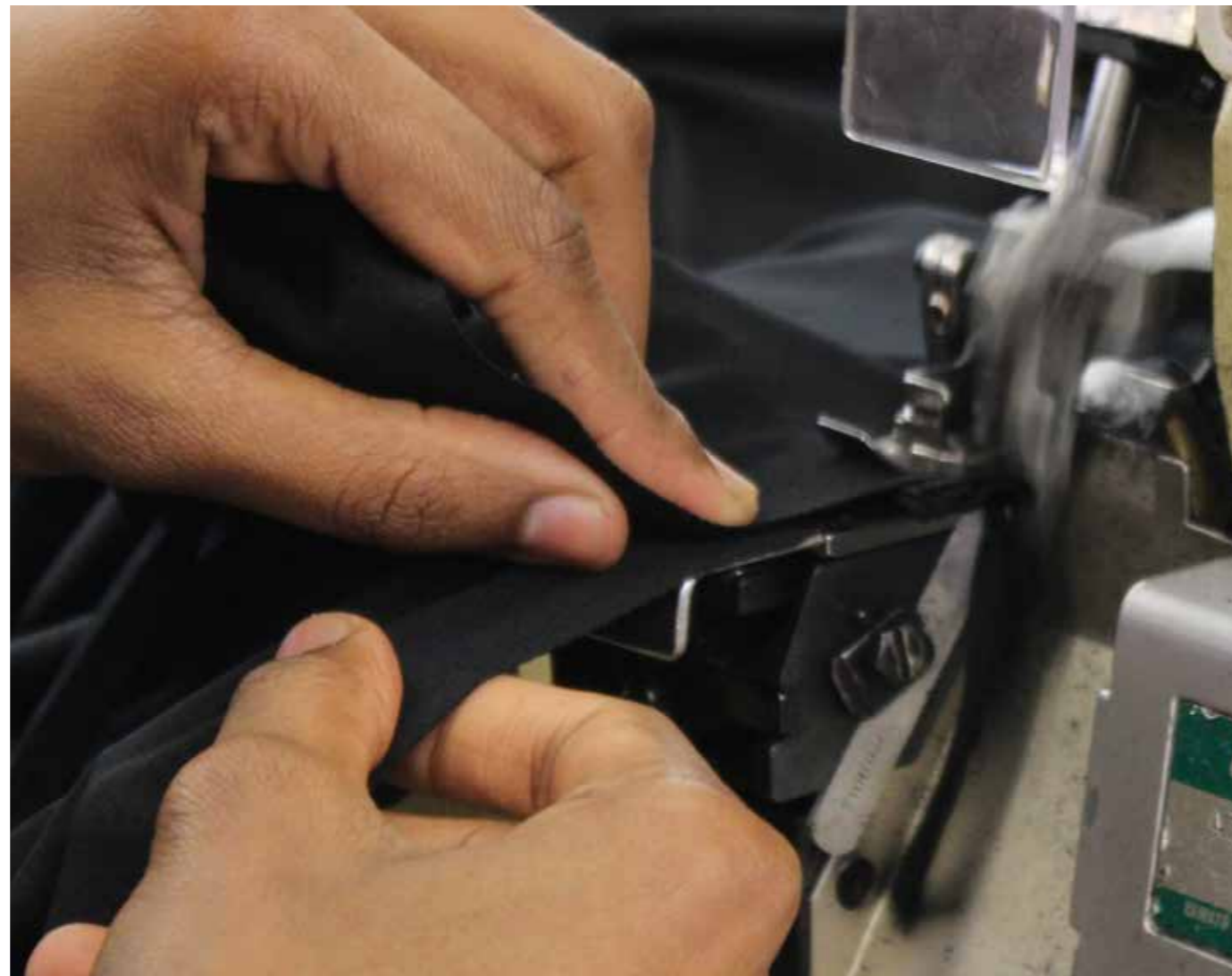
FAB-L mission is to provide a safe space for fashion, textile and clothing workers to get free advice and support. In the documentary we meet Kaenat Issufo and Tarek Islam, the team that has just been hired to coordinate this new service offered at the Highfields Centre. These services are not always available elsewhere and many workers are not aware of their basic rights⁷. The project aims to provide a frontline interface offering solutions to everyday problems and enabling feedback when cases of violations of workers' rights are identified. FAB-L is financially supported by trade unions, but also by some British fashion companies who are also committed to facilitating access to workers in their suppliers' factories. However, FAB-L remains an independent organisation.

LABOUR BEHIND THE LABEL (LBL)

This documentary is made in close collaboration with Labour Behind the Label, the organisation that represents the international Clean Clothes Campaign network in the UK, as does achACT in French-speaking Belgium. Labour Behind the Label supports the struggles of garment workers through lobbying, policy advocacy, information, awareness raising, mobilisation and campaigning.

Based on the report "Boohoo&co-vid-19" published by Labour Behind the Label, achACT had the idea to produce a documentary on the working conditions of garment workers in Leicester. The film shows the situation in the garment industry in Leicester. Dominique Muller, the organisation policy lead, guides us through the inner workings of Leicester-based textile production and through meetings with the various stakeholders active there. Labour Behind the Label is involved in discussions to improve working conditions in Leicester, lobbying, re-

⁷<https://highfieldscentre.ac.uk/fabl/>



searching and documenting violations of worker's rights.

LEICESTER GARMENT WORKERS

While the workers and their living conditions and exploitation are at the heart of the documentary, they are not directly featured in the film. This absence is mainly a consequence of the climate of fear in Leicester. After major media exposure in 2020 which (re)highlighted the working conditions in the factories, bearing witness has meant putting oneself in danger. Workers who have spoken out to journalists have been sacked and blacklisted.

It will take time and a lot of hard work by the above-mentioned organisations to get the word out. The filming conditions therefore led the production team to focus the story on those who contribute to organising support for workers and their struggles. A reconstructed testimony of a worker is used in the film in voice-over. The context also influenced the choice of the film's title.

LANDMARKS

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES RAISED IN THE DOCUMENTARY?

NO SUPPORT FOR MIGRANTS

Immigration to Leicester is mainly from India and Pakistan⁸. The most significant exodus took place in 1972. 27,000 people of Indian origin, initially settled in Uganda, were subject to mass expulsion following a decision by the then President Idi Amin Dada. With British passports, they arrived in Britain. 11,000 of them settled in Leicester. During the summer of 2022, an exhibition retraced this exodus through the testimonies of these migrants⁹.

The first few minutes of the documentary look back at a significant historical event in Leicester and the UK. In 1974, the strike¹⁰ by workers at the Imperial Typewriter factory highlighted the unequal treatment of migrants. At the heart of the struggle was the denunciation of the wage gap between white and Asian workers. This event changed attitudes in the UK. The strike, which was joined by hundreds of people, was not supported by the unions, which were accused of institutional racism¹¹. Again, an exhibition in 2019 traced the 14-week struggle, which was seen as a moment of awareness of racial discrimination in the British labour movement.

Today, the living and working conditions of migrants in Leicester remain extremely precarious. The lack of residency status means that many workers are willing to accept poor conditions in exchange for employment, even without a formal contract or a minimum wage. It also contributes to a situation where workers are unable or unwilling to report labour rights violations, for fear of abuse, deportation or investigation. The situation is exacerbated by the hostile policy of the UK Home Office, which aims to reduce immigration numbers by restricting the freedoms of those deemed to be in the UK illegally. In practice, this policy targets and punishes migrant workers rather than addressing exploitation and promoting systemic change in working conditions.

EXPLOITATION AS THE BASIS OF THE BUSINESS MODEL OF CLOTHING COMPANIES

Garment manufacturing is only lightly mechanised and relies heavily on the labour of millions of workers, mostly women and migrants. Everywhere, the garment industry sets up shop where it can benefit from a precarious and available workforce, employing those who have no choice but to accept disastrous working



conditions. It competes with both factories and states and exerts pressure to keep labour costs very low, which makes it extremely profitable. In Leicester, most of the workshops subcontract to e-commerce brands and retailers. Trendy garments, produced in small quantities, are frantically put on sale to create excitement and urgency for consumers to buy.

The business model proposed by these companies is based on increased flexibility of supply and an incentive to over-consume. If the working conditions in the garment factories are notoriously bad, recent studies have shown that they can be even more precarious in the value chains of ultra fast fashion players that sell only online¹².

It is the supplier who offers the cheapest price and can deliver in the shortest time

that wins the contract. The competition between suppliers for brand contracts is so great and the margins so small that no investment is made. The buildings are extremely old and do not comply with any safety regulations, and the workers are paid well below the minimum wage. In Leicester, workers reported wages of up to £3 an hour, while the minimum wage is three times higher. The same ratio is found worldwide between wages earned and the living wage¹³, a fundamental right demanded by workers' rights organisations.

Its geographical proximity to markets and labour costs well below the UK minimum wage make Leicester a popular production location for the UK's ultra fast fashion brands.

⁸<https://strikeatimperial.net/interviews>

⁹ <https://fr.africanews.com/2022/08/04/angleterre-une-exposition-sur-les-sud-asiatiques-ex-pulses-douganda/> and http://www.navrangarts.com/uploads/5/7/6/5/5765574/kampala_to_leicester_travelling_exhibition.pdf

¹⁰<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-48586737>

¹¹<https://books.google.be/books?id=AC4xc00uCmMC&pg=PT40&lpg=PT40&dq=Leicester-gr%C3%A8ve+1974&source=bl&ots=pa3tFJxg64&sig=ACfU3U37AaTYj-NXza6ujrjNaxststKyDw&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjksfhysP3AhVP8LsIHYj-nA2MQ6AF6BAgZEAM#v=onepage&q=Leicester%20gr%C3%A8ve%201974&f=false>

¹²https://www.achact.be/content/uploads/2022/03/202203_Analyse-e-commerce_VF.pdf

¹³https://fashionchecker.org/fr/living_wage.html



LANDMARKS

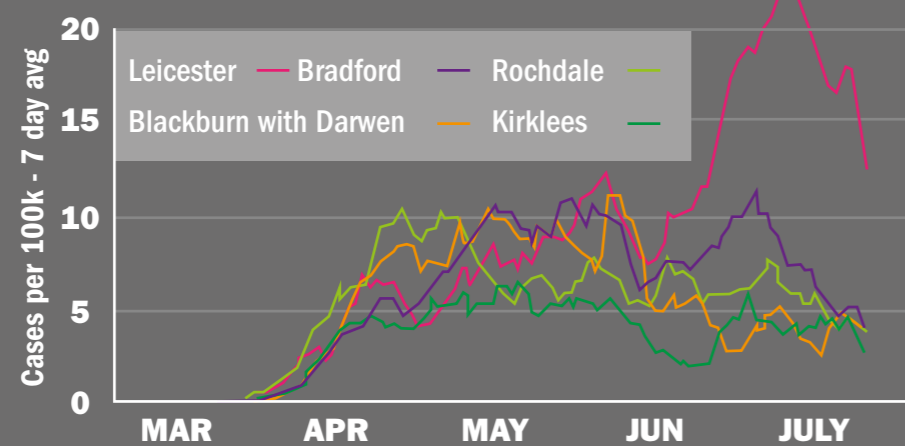
THE IMPACT OF THE COVID, WHICH IS BEING FELT BY GARMENT WORKERS

At the beginning of the pandemic, journalists and activists highlighted Leicester as a hotbed of infection.¹⁴ The link to the garment industry in Leicester was easy to make, as thousands of workers were forced to work, often unprotected, for Boohoo, sourcing mainly from Leicester.

When the first lockdown was announced, Boohoo changed its online offer in record time from dress clothes to loungewear. This speed was only possible by demanding extreme flexibility from its suppliers and forcing workers to go to the factory without any respect for the national safety lockdown measures in force.

THE NUMBER OF CASES IS FALLING IN MOST ENGLISH AREAS WITH THE HIGHEST INFECTIONS RATES

Rate of daily new cases per 100k people in upper tier local authorities



¹⁴<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/12115588/leicester-lockdown-set-to-be-extended-coronavirus/>

COMPANIES THAT DO NOT COMMUNICATE ABOUT THEIR SUPPLIERS

In the garment industry, subcontracting chains are often endless and unclear, exposing women workers to precarious working conditions and depriving them of any possibility of redress. This opacity, which is generated and maintained by the brands and fashion houses that place the orders, has the effect of disconnecting brands from the workers who make their clothes and, by the same token, releasing brands from any form of responsibility towards them.

Indeed, workers often do not know for which brands they produce clothes. Transparency in the supply chain is a crucial element in the implementation of the due diligence for these clothing companies. The e-retailers that source from Leicester do not disclose their suppliers. In Leicester, as in many garment factories, it is not uncommon for workshops to close and reopen under a different name, thereby blurring the lines of enquiry, making it impossible to trace the garments produced and evading even a very minimal level of control.

THE STATE THAT CONTROLS SO LITTLE

In Leicester, there are almost no controls on the payment of minimum wages or on working conditions. When companies are involved in abuses of fundamental rights, they are only rarely held accountable. While it is clear that they have a

responsibility to take action, in order to ensure that these rights are respected throughout the corporate value chain, the state must also put in place a legal framework that obliges them to do so. But "the government refuses to examine the legislation" says Dominique Muller of Labour behind the label in the documentary (21 '49")



WHAT SOLUTIONS ARE PUT IN PLACE OR SUGGESTED IN THE DOCUMENTARY?

OBSERVED SOLUTIONS

- Community and outreach work through the Fashion-workers Advice Bureau-Leicester (FAB-L), (25'05"),
- Spontaneous community support in the form of food aid during the covid period (36'10").
- The return of the unions to the struggle for garment workers' rights (8'20", 30'25", 32'10"),

SOLUTIONS STILL UNDER DISCUSSION

- A joint agreement at Leicester City Council level between brands, suppliers and unions is being negotiated. It aims to impose on brands a clear improvement in their purchasing practices, transparency and freedom of association. However, to date, after 2 years, this agreement has still not been finalised (29'25"),
- Develop legislation towards companies due diligence. "As long as there is no such legislation, brands can get away with the problems they have caused" says Dominique Müller of Labour behind the label (21'50").

SUGGESTED SOLUTION

- Take to the streets and protest "is what we need as manufacturers but also as workers" says the head of the subcontracting company Basic Premier, Mick Chima (20'00").

HOW CAN WE INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY SUPPORT THE STRUGGLES OF GARMENT WORKERS?

INFORM AND RELAY

The more that people are aware of what is happening in the fashion industry, the more people will be sensitive and demand better conditions for the workers making products sold on our shopping streets. This base of information and empathy is necessary to participate in challenging companies or politicians and demanding action.

After the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013, a disaster that killed 1,134 people, the worldwide outcry forced companies to act. We are declaring #RanaPlazaNeverAgain, not only to ensure that no disaster happens again, but also so that we don't wait for another disaster to happen before taking action.

achACT regularly relays and publishes information, analyses and tools to improve knowledge of the issues facing millions of garment workers and the means to take action: www.achact.be

Follow us! We publish a [newsletter](#) and are also present on

 [@achact.asbl](#)

 [@achact.asbl](#)

SUPPORT ACHACT AND ITS INTERNATIONAL NETWORK, THE CLEAN CLOTHES CAMPAIGN

We act by raising awareness, doing political advocacy and lobbying at the level of clothing companies. We need support to be able to have more influence.

How?

By signing and relaying proposed questions, By participating in the activities and street actions that we organise, By organising an event, a screening or an action yourself thanks to our educational tools.

LEARNING GOALS

AT THE END OF THE ACTIVITY, THE PARTICIPANT WILL BE ABLE TO:

- To summarize the situation of garment workers in the UK in relation to migration,
- To understand the operating mecha-

nisms at the heart of the dominant economic model in the fashion industry,

- Identify the solutions implemented by the actors in Leicester and propose ways forward here.

BEFORE THE FILM

- Briefly contextualise the subject of the film
- Suggest an instruction: during the film, pay attention to what touches you, challenges you or overwhelms you so that you can share it after the film.

AFTER THE FILM

OPTION 1 OPEN DIALOGUE (1H)

Start from the emotion aroused by the film and lead the discussion towards a better understanding of the issue

- What surprised you about this documentary?
- What are the main problems described in the documentary?
- From what you have seen, what is problematic about the subcontracting system?
- What are the main difficulties faced by the workers featured in the documentary?
- What solutions are being implemented or suggested to support workers?

End on possible action

- What do you see as our role as citizens, consumers and workers in supporting the struggles in the garment industry?
- What did you learn from this film that you would like everyone to know?

OPTION 2 METHODICAL UNFOLDING (2H)

Laying out the film elements

- The actors involved (their place, their role, their importance, their interactions)
- The issues raised (their importance, their impact on workers, how these issues relate to each other)
- The solutions implemented or suggested, (the way they have (e.g., what was found, how it was achieved, what difficulties were encountered in implementing it)

Materials to be used

- Photos of the actors involved, provided by achACT.
- Excerpts from the documentary to remind or underline a point.
- A table to write/draw the participants' contributions, visualise and build a reflection.

READ

[Le rapport Boohoo & covid-19 publié par Labour Behind the Label](#)

The Boohoo & covid-19 report published by Labour Behind the Label

The Analysis: E-commerce: [what social cost is hidden for workers?](#)

The Analysis: [Covid19, a binding agreement is needed](#)

Learn more about the living wage and transparency of fashion companies: [The Fashion Checker survey](#)

SUPPORT

[The Pay Your Workers campaign](#)

The national and European campaigns for the adoption of a law on the duty of care: [Les droits humains n'ont pas de prix](#)

[Justice is everybody's business](#)

Educational Guide on Due diligence: [Making the Case for Corporate Due Diligence Legislation](#)