Dear Home Secretary

Protecting people being exploited in UK garment factories

We are writing as a broad coalition of parliamentarians, businesses, investors and civil society organisations about our concerns regarding the unethical labour practices taking place in garment factories across the UK. We request that urgent action is taken by the Government to implement a ‘Fit to Trade’ licensing scheme that ensures all garment factories are meeting their legal obligations to their employees.

As we have seen in the media over the last month, a concerning number of garment workers in key hubs in the UK, such as Leicester, have continued to work in factories throughout lockdown without adequate PPE or social distancing measures in place. These reports on the terrible working conditions people face in UK garment factories add weight to concerns which have been raised over the last five years by academics and Parliamentary Committees about the gross underpayment of the national living wage and serious breaches of health and safety law in these workplaces. Unless action is taken now, thousands more people will likely face exploitation.

Responsible retailers and brands have made significant efforts to improve labour practices in garment factories, but whilst this has supported improvements in a handful of factories, it has not led to the desired system-wide changes needed. Most leading fashion retailers have therefore significantly scaled down their UK supply. There is now an opportunity for the UK to become a world-leading, innovative, export led, ethical fashion and textile manufacturing industry, delivering better skilled jobs, that in times of crisis can also be utilised for PPE production. If the right steps are taken, fashion retailers and brands will seek to source more production from the UK, which will provide new decent jobs in areas like the East Midlands and North West, and improve the country’s competitiveness and balance of trade.

We therefore support the proposals of the British Retail Consortium and others on the need to implement statutory licensing of garment factory owners and managers to ensure they are ‘Fit to Trade’. This would protect workers and provide an incentive for retailers and brands to invest in the UK. As a minimum, this should cover protection of workers from forced labour, debt bondage and mistreatment, ensuring payment of National Minimum Wage, VAT, PAYE, National Insurance, Holiday Pay and Health and Safety. These measures will also raise tax revenues for the Treasury and create a
barrier that prevents rogue businesses from accessing the market and undercutting legitimate fashion manufacturing companies, creating a level playing field for businesses to compete fairly.

We would welcome your support for this proposal and look forward to discussing it with you.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Dr Lisa Cameron MP, Chair of the APPG for Textiles and Fashion
Baroness Young of Hornsey OBE, Chair of the APPG for Ethics and Sustainability in Fashion
Helen Dickinson OBE, Chief Executive of the British Retail Consortium

Supportive signatories:

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
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Wera Hobhouse MP
Darren Jones MP
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Ben Lake MP
Clive Lewis MP
Tony Lloyd MP
Caroline Lucas MP
Kenny MacAskill MP
Angus MacNeil MP
Shabana Mahmood MP
Catherine McKinnell MP
Stuart McDonald MP
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Mountain Warehouse
N Brown
New Look
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The Very Group
Association of Labour Providers
Ethical Trading Initiative
Fashion Revolution
Fashion Roundtable
Fast Forward
Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX)
Hope for Justice
International Organization for Migration UK (IOM UK)
Recruitment & Employment Confederation
Slave-Free Alliance
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