

UK: Coronavirus exposes Leicester's sweatshops and government hypocrisy

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The lockdown imposed on the East Midlands city of Leicester after an outbreak of COVID-19 has been linked to garment factory sweatshops. This has forced government ministers to strike a pose of outrage at a situation they have not only ignored for years, but also intend to replicate across the country.

Last Wednesday, the day after a local public health lockdown of Leicester was ordered by the Boris Johnson government, campaign group Labour Behind the Label (LBL) published a report, "Boohoo & COVID-19: The people behind the profit." The group has been informed of multiple Leicester factories where no social distancing has been implemented and no masks have been provided.

Workers were told to come into work while sick or be sacked. In several factories of up to 100 people, workers were forced to carry on working while known to be infected with coronavirus or while living in households known to be infected. Factories continued running as normal throughout the national lockdown.

On Sunday, the Times published an undercover investigation carried out earlier that week, while Leicester was formally under local lockdown. Their reporter spent two days working at a garment factory, where he was told by another worker to expect to be paid between £3.50 and £4 an hour. A foreman explained, "Anywhere in Leicester you will only find textile factories that pay up to £4 an hour." This is less than half of the already pitifully low national minimum wage. There were no gloves, health warning signs or social distancing measures and only a few workers wore masks.

Conservative Health Secretary Matt Hancock and Home Secretary Priti Patel feigned surprise. Hancock told Sky News, "There are some quite significant concerns about some of the employment practices in some of the clothing factories in Leicester," putting on a stern face to tell such supposedly maverick businesses, "We're not just asking nicely."

Patel outdid herself in a customary display of cynicism, referring to the "abhorrent practices" uncovered by the Times report and declaring, "These allegations are truly appalling." She directed the National Crime Agency to investigate modern slavery in Leicester's clothes factories and said in Parliament, "Let this be a warning to those who are exploiting people in sweatshops like these for their own commercial gain. This is just the start. What you are doing is illegal, it will not be tolerated, and we are coming after you."

This is like Al Capone threatening to clean up the Mafia. The Tories and the entire ruling class have knowingly presided over Leicester's sweatshops for years. In 2015, the Ethical Trading Initiative commissioned research by the University of Leicester into the city's garment industry. "New Industry on a Skewed Playing Field: Supply Chain Relations and Working Conditions in UK Garment Manufacturing" found that "the majority of garment workers are paid way below the National Minimum Wage, do not have employment contracts, and are subject to intense and arbitrary work practices." It uncovered "work practices that result in health problems [and] inadequate health and safety standards..."

This research was presented to Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights, who then produced a report, "Human Rights and Business 2017: Promoting responsibility and ensuring accountability," which found that "labour rights abuses are endemic in the Leicester garment industry."

In January 2017, Channel 4's "Dispatches" produced, "Undercover: Britain's Cheap Clothes." A reporter worked at three Leicester factories producing clothes for brands like River Island, New Look, Boohoo and Misguided. He was paid between £3 and £3.50 an hour. In one factory, the fire exits were blocked, and a worker was smoking on the factory floor.

A Financial Times investigation in 2018, “Dark factories: Labour exploitation in Britain’s garment industry,” found average wages of £4.25 an hour and significant fire safety hazards. The reporter explained, “The enforcement agencies can hardly claim to be unaware of what is happening. Representatives from UK Visas and Immigration, the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) and the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority all attended a meeting hosted by Leicester mayor Sir Peter Soulsby last October, where the problems were discussed in detail. But a comb through of freedom-of-information requests, MPs questions and public records does not reveal a state that has done much to sort this out.”

In 2019, the government rejected every recommendation by the Environmental Audit Committee’s “Fixing Fashion Report: Clothing Consumption and Sustainability,” which noted, “we were told it is an open secret that some garment factories in places like Leicester are not paying the minimum wage.”

This January, Tory MP for North West Leicestershire Andrew Bridgen raised the “miserable conditions” in Leicester’s factories and requested a meeting with the business secretary. In April, Conservative politicians led by Baroness Verma sent an email to Leicester’s Labour councillors and mayor raising concerns about factories operating illegally and asking if the Labour Party was reporting these activities to the police and trading standards.

But neither the Tory government, nor the Labour Party, has lifted a finger to address this criminal exploitation. HMRC announced in January that in the last six years just six factories in Leicester had been fined for failing to pay the minimum wage. As for lethal safety failings, LBL report that workers’ complaints to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have been ignored. Nationally, the HSE has not issued a single prohibition notice shutting down a factory since the pandemic began and only two improvement notices.

No action has been or will be taken because Leicester’s sweatshops—and those elsewhere—form an integral part of Britain’s fashion industry, earning huge profits. The onset of globalisation in the 1970s and 1980s prompted the collapse of the UK’s apparel manufacturing industry, as companies moved to cheap labour platforms in the Far East. Following the 2008 financial crash, however, and the expansion of “fast fashion,” new retailers have used local labour forces (largely composed of migrant workers) and a network of small, outsourced, unregulated suppliers to produce new clothing lines at even lower costs.

This business model has flourished during the pandemic. Boohoo’s sales surged 45 percent in the quarter to the end of May this year, taking the company’s valuation to £5.3 billion. Its owners and CEO are in line for £50 million payouts if Boohoo continues to grow.

More important still, far from being outraged by these practices the government consider them a model for the future. Prime Minister Johnson’s Brexiteer cabinet is built around the ideologues of Britannia Unchained, an ultra-free market Thatcherite screed written by Patel, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, International Trade Secretary Liz Truss, Minister of State for Business Kwasi Kwarteng and Tory MP Chris Skidmore.

Britannia Unchained attacks the UK’s “bloated state, high taxes and excessive regulation” and “unproductive” workers, described as “among the worst idlers in the world.” Its advocates call for a completion of the “Thatcher revolution,” in the words of her former Chancellor Nigel Lawson, to secure the profitability of British business through massive tax cuts and deregulation.

The coronavirus pandemic is bringing the terrible social consequences of such unbridled capitalist exploitation into sharp relief. While Leicester represents one of the worst and most advanced cases, this is a danger that confronts the whole working class. Food processing workers suffer under nearly identical conditions, while warehouse, postal, transport, health and social care workers are being forced to risk their lives in unsafe conditions for minimal wages.

No resistance has been offered by the trade union bureaucrats and nor will they ever do so. Workers must organise their own independent rank-and-file committees to secure genuinely safe conditions and liveable pay in a common struggle across all sectors, as part of the struggle for a socialist transformation of society.



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