

exCHAINS



*Solidarity along the supply chain:
From production to retail, workers unite!*

Workers along the Global Supply Chain: Strengthened by New Strategy!

»The new negotiation strategy can strengthen our union work!«, says Prathibha Ramanath, trade unionist of Indian GATWU, in a video conference with German works council colleagues of H&M and Zara, and Bangladeshi trade union NGWF.

The video conference was organised by the ExChains network of TIE Global for 250 H&M works council members, 30 Zara general works council members, and Asian garment trade union activists, to be able to have a direct mutual exchange. The discussion made clear what the ExChains network is all about: «We want to work together as colleagues, and to support each other by common activities«, says Amirul Haque Amin of the Bangladeshi garment workers union NGWF. A new strategy was developed within the network to make this mutual support happen.

Workers at garment supplier factories, together with their unions, develop demands and work out ways to negotiate them locally with the factory owners. Issues might be very specific, such as access to drinking water or clean sanitary facilities, but also more comprehensive, such as demands for higher wages or shorter working hours. With their actions and negotiations, the factory workers also target the multinational corporations who are sourcing from their factories. H&M and Zara/Inditex are two of the most

important companies sourcing from Bangladeshi garment factories, and are also sourcing from India.

»Some demands we can push through directly by ourselves, for other demands we need to transgress the factory level and include the corporations in negotiations. It is them who have the deepest impact on our working conditions«, Prathibha explains the new approach. Anna Bischoff, Zara general works council president, confirms: »We, the works council members and union activists in Germany, can support Asian garment workers' negotiations by confronting German management with their demands and by informing our German fellow workers.« Thus, the negotiation

power of local workers and their unions can be strengthened. »Meeting our colleagues from production, as made possible by the video conference, is important if we want the joint strategy to become a success«, adds Saskia Stock, H&M general works council president.

The new strategy shall support local trade unions in increasing their negotiation power and their ability to push through more important demands. First winning experiences of GATWU in Bangalore indicate that the strategy works, says Rahtamma, union activist and worker at Texports Creation, during the video conference: »By joint actions and negotiations we were able to keep the factory janitors from being



fired. Additionally, we won three free Sundays per month.« Such gains strengthen all workers in their struggles. According to Umesh, worker and trade union activist at H&M supplier Shahi Exports, the experiences with factory level negotiations encouraged him and his colleagues to stand up against social security cuts: »Our wins in the factory showed us what we can achieve when we stand together. The government finally had to withdraw the planned cuts. This was a victory for all garment workers.«

During the coming weeks and months, the trade unions working together within the ExChains network will establish specific demands to the suppliers of transnational garment corporations and start negotiations and factory floor level actions. In Germany, the network will create public awareness of the strategy and win further works council activists for the network, specifically at Primark and Esprit. The new strategy is also part of a newly established ver.di working group »Young Fashion«.

Amin from Bangladesh stresses that the new strategy relies on mutuality: »We will clearly support German retail workers' struggles and demands with actions in Bangladesh.« For the Asian garment workers' unions, this South-North solidarity

work is not a new experience. Most recently, in the spring of 2016, the Indian GATWU organised a video with activists stating their support for German retail workers threatened by layoffs when Zara wanted to close down five stores in Germany.

In their struggle against the closures, the Zara workers also received support from their German colleagues of the H&M general works council whose members paid a visit to one of the five stores concerned. At the same time, a number of H&M colleagues participated in Zara workers' protest actions. The general works council of Esprit, too, became involved and sent a video support message.

Saskia of H&M emphasises: »Mutual support in concrete struggles is a central element of the new strategy – in any place along the supply chain.« But such actions are merely a first step of the new strategy for strengthening trade union and works council work in the globalised garment industry. Trade unionists and works councils want to work together on issues of ExChains, health-compatible working conditions, and the strengthening of workers' self-organisation.

For example: The H&M general works council campaign for decent



working conditions in Germany and all along the supply chain. It was launched at the H&M works council reunion and links the struggle against precarious and health-damaging working conditions in Germany with the struggle for improved working and living conditions in the production countries. For, in the words of general works council president Saskia: »After all, we are all facing the same company in different places on the globe: there in garment production, here in garment sale. We understand: If we want decent working conditions all along the supply chain, we must join our struggles.«

Building solidarity links between workers along the subcontracting chain of garment production and retail in South Asia and Europe, is the main objective of the **ExChains** network. Solidarity is vital to the global struggle against workers' exploitation and conditions of poverty.

In the **ExChains** network, TIE (Transnationals Information Exchange) is collaborating with regional rank-and-file unions:

- ✓ Free Trade Zones and General

Services Employees Union (FTZ & GSEU, Sri Lanka)

- ✓ National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF, Bangladesh)
- ✓ Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU, Chennai/India)
- ✓ Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU, Bangalore/India)
- ✓ Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft (ver.di, Germany)

We want to:

- ✓ raise awareness about the global garment supply chain

- ✓ enable concrete solidarity between workers along the supply chain
- ✓ support freedom of association and the right to organise
- ✓ create pressure on big retail corporations

Further information:

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