

up front

sweat shop

A year ago few people thought about where their Topshop jeans or Primark shirt came from, or how they came to be so fantastically cheap. Six months ago a major supermarket would never have been forced by a single shareholder to debate fair treatment of employees in its supply chain.

Things are changing. War on Want has been leading the charge to end the exploitation of sweatshop workers, and all those who suffer at the hands of corporate power. As a result of our campaigns and your support we are finally starting to hold corporations to account for their actions. December 2007

**WAR ON
WANT**
FIGHTING GLOBAL POVERTY

On recent visits to Honduras and Bangladesh, we witnessed first hand the human cost of cheap clothes.

Across two continents, scores of people told the same stories of abusive conditions and lives in poverty. Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere. Its sweatshops employ about 130,000 people, and the sector is expected to grow. In a country with 28% unemployment jobs are precious, putting workers in an extremely precarious position with no leverage to bargain for better conditions. The women we met work 12-hour shifts with only one 20-minute break and restricted bathroom visits. When quotas are not met workers face physical and verbal abuse, while repetitive strain injuries and respiratory problems are regular occurrences. Factories rarely provide safety equipment. Requests for sick leave often result in sackings, so the women work despite illness and injury. Lourdes, 28, told us that she habitually took large amounts of painkillers so she could work despite debilitating pain in her back and shoulder. When she went to see the factory doctor, she was told that her pain was imaginary.

It's the same story in Bangladesh, where the garment sector is the main engine of the economy. Jobs are scarce and nearly 90% of garment workers have come to the capital city Dhaka looking for work, hoping to be able to send money home to their villages. UK retailers reap huge profits but the workers in Bangladesh are rarely able to provide for their families. We visited workers who share rooms with up to five people in aluminium shacks built over open sewers. But with salaries of just £8 a month, 300 people cram into each shack to make it affordable. Santer left his family to work 12 to 14 hours a day as a guard in a factory. He shares one small room with five other men, yet feels ashamed for not being able

to support his family. Workers told us about the abuse they face if quotas are not met. In the hot, poorly ventilated factories, respiratory problems are rampant but medical attention is often impossible to fit into an 18-hour work day. Locked factory doors have resulted in many deaths in recent years when factories burned down or collapsed with workers trapped inside.

War on Want supports workers by funding organisations in Honduras and Bangladesh, largely run by people who were themselves sweatshop workers. In Honduras the Colectiva de Mujeres Hondurenas (CODEMUH) has made huge progress in exposing the abuse of women workers in factories and lobbying the Honduran government to provide better protection for them. CODEMUH also provides health services and legal advice from centres located close to the factory sites, and educates women about their rights. When Lourdes was taken to a CODEMUH centre she saw an independent doctor who was able to save her severely disintegrated shoulder joint. She received paid sick leave and told us that without CODEMUH's help she would not be alive today.

War on Want has supported the National Garment Workers Federation in Bangladesh for over 10 years. They run an independent union in the country's 3,000 factories, claiming at least one member in every factory in the country. They run campaigns to educate Bangladesh's two million garment workers of their rights, and fight for regular payment of wages and overtime, time off for illness and holidays, and improved working conditions.



War on Want's campaign for corporate accountability has had a very big year, but we need your help to continue the fight!



We support sweatshop workers in Bangladesh (L) and Honduras (R) to stand up for their rights.

War on Want's campaign for corporate accountability has had a very big year, and the victories are mounting up. In December, 2006 when we published *Fashion Victims*, our report on the Bangladeshi garment industry, the human cost for cheap fashion was not on the national agenda.

Now barely a week goes by without our report being mentioned in the pages of the *Guardian*, in local papers around the country and even in magazines like *Grazia*. Major retailers like Asda and Tesco are on the defensive, facing tough questions from the public on how they can continue to abuse suppliers despite assurances to treat them ethically.

Reporting on abuses

We hammered British supermarkets again in March with a report on the global flower industry, this time focusing on workers in Colombia and Kenya – two major suppliers to the European market. The report highlighted the dangerous working conditions, low wages and lack of labour rights on flower farms supplying supermarkets in the UK. Working with our partner organisations who support flower workers in those countries, we showed once again that, despite the supermarkets' claims to the contrary, workers on the other side of the world are routinely taken advantage of when supplying our shops.

In September we followed up with *Let's Clean Up Fashion*, a joint report with Labour Behind the Label looking at the garment industry worldwide. The report focuses on the shockingly low wages paid to workers, with pay in every developing country studied falling short of a living wage.

We also examine the huge wage inequality that exists in the industry. In just one example, Topshop owner Philip Green saw £1.2 billion in dividends this year, enough to double the salaries of Cambodia's whole garment workforce for eight years. War on Want is committed to standing up to the mammoth corporations whose stranglehold on so much of the global economy grows ever tighter. We have long been guided by this principle, and it informs many of our campaigns.

Profiting from poverty

In our alternative company reports we have taken on some of the biggest corporate names, like Coca-Cola and Wal-Mart, and scrutinised their claims to be acting responsibly around the world. Even our campaign for Palestine looks at the role corporations play in suppressing the rights of people in that country, as in our *Profiting from the Occupation* report published in 2006.

But the tide is changing. We went head to head with Tesco this June when War on Want's company



These tin shacks, all that many Bangladeshi sweat-shop workers can afford, stand over open sewers.

secretary forced the company to debate a resolution on its suppliers ethically. We made big headlines and stunned Tesco when a massive 20% of its shareholders rebelled and refused to buy the company line that it was doing all it could for workers in its supply chain.

The battle at the Tesco AGM was made possible by War on Want and other campaigners who fought to hold corporations accountable when they won changes to the Companies Act 2006. For the first time ever, and over the strenuous objections of the business lobby, some companies have to consider their impact on suppliers.

Building on success

All this media attention has helped make people aware of corporate abuses of people in developing countries. Now we must translate that awareness into action. We have been campaigning tirelessly in the UK to get the government to enact legislation that would prevent retailers from exploiting low wages in poor countries. This abusive behaviour from British companies must stop. This will only happen when the government steps up and passes a law to make it stop.

We took one step closer when Anne Moffat MP formed an All Party Parliamentary Group on corporate responsibility this July. When announcing the inaugural meeting she said:

“My intention is to set up a group to look at the possible avenues open to members to achieve a workable framework of regulation or legislation that ensures that UK based companies behave appropriately and decently when they move their business to a foreign location. It is time to consider looking at regulating the behaviour of UK based countries in countries around the world they choose to establish businesses in.”

What the companies say

The companies themselves claim all is well in their back yard. They say that their audits of their own supply chains are enough and that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) measures ensure that they are an asset to the communities in which they work.

This is not the case. By all accounts the auditing process is deeply flawed. Factories are often given advance notice of audits, giving managers time to coach or intimidate workers before interviews, prepare inaccurate record books and hide health and safety problems. CSR amounts to little more than a way to deflect calls for tighter regulation. War on Want's reports prove that shortchanging workers is part of the business model. Corporations are in the business of making money, not looking out for disadvantaged workers. That responsibility must be taken out of their hands.

Corporations are in the business of making money, not looking out for disadvantaged workers. That responsibility must be taken out of their hands.

Please donate today so we can continue the fight.

donate

£50

£20

£250

What could your donation achieve?

- £20 could pay for one woman to attend a forum in Honduras where sweatshop workers learn how to defend their rights and fight for better working conditions.
- £50 could help publish a report raising awareness of corporate practices and exploitation.
- £100 could help us to print action cards and campaigns material to fight for corporate accountability in the UK.
- £250 could pay the legal fees for Bangladeshi garment workers who need to take action against their employers for unpaid wages.

**We can't do it
without you**

www.waronwant.org

Support War on Want today to help our partners who support exploited workers, and send a strong message to corporations that the exploitation must end. We have taken big steps forward; we need your help to finish the job.

Yes, I can help. Here is my gift of

£20 £50 £100 £250 £

Name

Address please write in capitals

Post Code

E-mail please write clearly

I enclose a cheque / CAF Voucher / Postal Order made payable to War on Want

Please debit my Mastercard / Visa / Switch

Card Number

Valid From

Expiry Date

Issue Number Switch Only

Security Code last 3 digits on your signature strip

Name of Cardholder

Signature(s)

Date

New Gift Aid Declaration
Please tick if you would like War on Want to reclaim the tax that you have paid on your donations since 6 April 2001 and on any future donations.

You must have paid an amount of income and/or capital gains tax (in the UK) equal to the tax that will be claimed (currently 28p for each £1 you give).

NEWS

For the first time ever, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has agreed to hear complaints of human and labour rights abuses from garment workers in Honduras. CODEMUH (the Collective of Honduran Women), War on Want's partner in Honduras, will represent Honduran workers at the hearing. The IACHR hearing is a major advance, and one CODEMUH and other organisations have been waiting two years for. CODEMUH's testimony will highlight the instability of the garment sector, and the havoc it plays with workers' lives.

Trade union activists in Sri Lanka were under intense pressure earlier this year after a spate of abductions and threats there in February. The immediate crisis has now passed but five activists remain in custody without charges. Our partner in Sri Lanka, the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union, is calling on the government to release the activists being held and investigate all recent threats to activists' lives.

In July War on Want launched its Hands Off Iraqi Oil appeal, raising money and the profile of our work in conflict zones. As of this writing, Iraq's oil law has not yet become law. If it does, Iraq will lose control of its oil – and vital revenue – to Western multinational companies.

For the second year running, War on Want has been named Q Magazine's Charity of the Year. We are proud to be recognised again for our cutting-edge campaigns and support of grassroots organisations that are helping those in the developing world who need it most.

[Heavily armed gates to a Honduran sweatshop.](#)



Thank you to everyone who gave generously to our summer appeal in support of work in conflict zones and the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU). The IFOU held its third annual conference on privatisation in September. The event, supported by War on Want as in previous years, is the first time oil union leaders from all over the country have met together to form a united front.

Conference delegates made five recommendations to the Iraqi government, including investment in the oil industry to increase production immediately, the establishment of a college for energy studies and the rehabilitation of the Iraqi public sector. The three conferences have been critical in raising awareness of the oil law within Iraq, and mobilising support against the draft law.

Private military and security companies (PMSCs) have been in the headlines again after a spate of shootings of civilians in Iraq, but the UK government has refused to rein in these corporate mercenaries. War on Want is stepping up its pressure on the government to regulate PMSCs, which the next issue of Up Front will examine in detail.

A birthday is coming up... Christmas may be a week away... and you are stuck for ideas because you want to give something different and meaningful. Our Alternative Gifts could be just the thing. We have gifts ranging from £5 to £100 that could make a difference to someone trying to overcome poverty and make a better life. For more details visit the shop on our website at www.waronwant.org